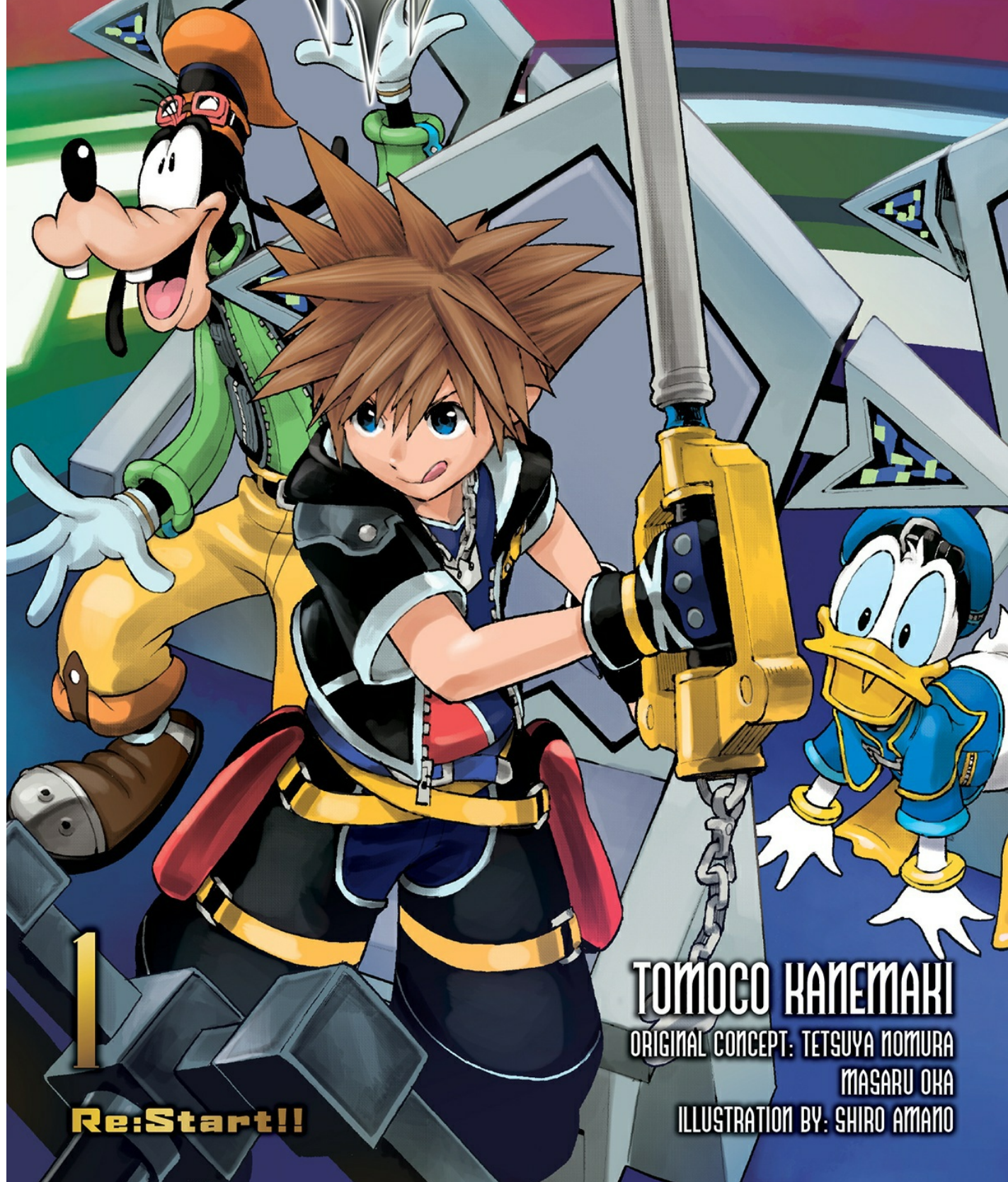


Disney SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL



Re:Start!!

TOMOCO KANEMAKI

ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA

MASARU OKA

ILLUSTRATION BY: SHIRO AMANO

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Vol. 1
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Tomoco Kanemaki

Original Concept

Tetsuya Nomura

Masaru Oka

Illustrations

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NEW YORK

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ILLUSTRATIONS: SHIRO AMANO,

ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA, MASARU OKA Translation by Luke Baker

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Prologue

It was a strange town, full of buildings rising out of the clear, blue water like some form of aquatic plant. And it was one of many—each little town was made of many small, white homes stacked up on one another to form a large cone. They were all connected by ropeways over the water that separated them, though it was difficult to tell whether that water was a lake or a vast ocean. There were windmills here and there, and waterfowl soared freely through the air beneath an endless sky.

If you looked more closely, you could see older dwellings beneath the surface, perhaps submerged there since long, long ago.

At the top of an especially tall town stood what appeared to be a clocktower.

Inside, two boys sat facing each other over a game board while soft light and a gentle breeze came in through the window. One of the boys had black hair and was dressed in white, while his silver-haired companion wore black.

“Have you heard of the ancient Keyblade War?” asked the boy in black as he moved one of his pieces to take one of his opponent’s.

“Of course I have,” replied the boy in white before moving his piece to capture another.

“Long ago, Keyblade wielders waged a war over the ownership of light,” the boy in black clarified. He took his turn.

“Yeah, the Master’s favorite story,” answered the boy in white.

The boy in black mused, “I wonder what they planned on doing with Kingdom Hearts after making it appear.”

The game still continued as they conversed.

“Who knows? I don’t get why anyone would initiate a war,” replied the boy in white, and his friend put a hand to his mouth and smiled faintly.

“So...you know the Lost Masters?”

“Who?” the white-robed boy asked back straight away.

“They’re the ones who started the Keyblade War.”

“Never heard of ’em. Where’d you hear about that?” The boy in white regarded the game board thoughtfully for a moment.

“Or...they’re the ones for whom the war started,” the boy in black added meaningfully.

“I’m not following you.”

“You can drop the facade.”

“Facade?” The white-robed boy’s fingers hesitated over the board.

“‘On that land shall darkness prevail and light expire.’ A prospective Keyblade Master should know this.”

“If you say so,” the boy in white said indifferently. It was hard to tell if he truly didn’t know, or if he was simply faking it.

“The Gazing Eye sees the fate of the world. The future—it’s already been written.”

The boy in black looked over at the wall where a special Keyblade with a single eye was hanging on display.

“Really? I’m not so sure about that,” said the boy in white as he moved a piece forward on the board. “Besides, who’s to say I can’t change it? And maybe light will prevail.” He claimed another of his opponent’s pieces.

“Pretty confident. But things aren’t in your favor.” The boy in black took a piece, too.

“Perhaps. But unlike darkness, there is more to light than meets the eye. You might be surprised.”

The boy in white lifted his eyes from the board and regarded his friend.

“Oh, I hope so,” the boy in black replied, meeting his gaze.

The silver-haired boy in black was Xehanort, and the dark-haired boy in white was Eraqus.

The name of this town was Scala ad Caelum, the stairway to the sky.

Warm sunlight shone upon the two boys.

They can take your world, they can take your heart, cut you loose from all
you know...

But if it's your fate, then every step forward will always be a step closer to
home.

There are seven hearts to save.

What do you desire?



Chapter 1

OLYMPUS

Chapter 1

Olympus

SORA DASHED UP THE STEPS OF THE MYSTERIOUS Tower and found his two companions waiting for him in front of the door.

“Okay, start talking!” Donald griped, his tail shaking.

“You were gone a long time. What were ya doin’?” asked Goofy with some concern.

Shortly after Sora had finished his Mark of Mastery exam and returned to the tower from the Sleeping Worlds, Sora had ventured back to those worlds again.

“Heh-heh-heh. Secret,” Sora replied with a laugh, then flung the door open.

He wasn’t about to tell everyone what he was up to, but he was glad to know his friends over there were all right.

“I’m back!” Sora expected Riku, Kairi, and Mickey to be there waiting for him, but, instead of them, Yen Sid was the one present. “Huh? Just us?”

Sora walked up to the sorcerer’s desk with Donald and Goofy behind him.

“The others all had important work to do, so I sent them on their way,” stated Yen Sid.

“That’s great. They coulda said good-bye.”

Sora seemed truly disappointed when Donald remarked, “It’s your fault you missed them.”

“It is not. I just like to say good-bye to all my friends,” Sora shot back.

“Then do it faster!”

“I’m here now, right?”

“We have matters to discuss,” Yen Sid said, putting a stop to the argument. Sora and his friends snapped to attention. “In order to defeat Xehanort, there

are allies we must gather, acting now to rouse them from their slumber. We have discussed this before, Sora.”

The trio of friends nodded.

“Your Mark of Mastery exam was conducted in the hopes that you would acquire the power to wake them. However, the darkness nearly took control of you, and your grasp of your new abilities leaves much to be desired.”

Sora’s head drooped in dejection. The master was right—because of Organization XIII’s plotting, Sora had fallen into a Sleeping World close to the darkness and had been consumed.

“Furthermore, Xehanort nearly made you his vessel, and in the process stripped you of most of the power you had gained by then. I suspect you have already noticed this, correct?”

Sora swallowed hard. Donald and Goofy looked over at him with concern.

“Sora...,” the two of them said worriedly.

But Sora’s head snapped up. “Whatever!” he chirped. “Happens all the time.”

Every time he had temporarily lost his powers—back in the Sleeping Worlds, Castle Oblivion, and when he woke in the old mansion—he had eventually made his way back to full strength with the help of his friends. He knew things would work out this time, too.

“Yes. Chip and Dale are currently analyzing data that Ansem the Wise provided to Riku, which could offer us a clue to retrieving our friends’ lost hearts. I have very high hopes for this data. However, our greatest chance of stopping Xehanort’s plan still lies with you, Sora. If you trust the guidance your heart gives, I know we will find all of the guardians of light.”

Sora nodded.

Seven guardians—and seven princesses. These sources of light had always protected the worlds, and they would need to keep doing so for some time to come.

“But first, you must regain all the strength you have lost. Perhaps it is foolish to expect a complete recovery, but it is absolutely vital you perfect one power

—the power of waking, which you failed to master during your exam. There’s someone who lost his strength and found it again, a true hero to whom you ought to pay a visit. Perhaps he can point you in the right direction.”

The moment Sora heard the word *hero*, his face lit up. He knew whom that meant, and he briefly mimicked him by flexing his muscles and striking cool poses.

“Got it,” he replied with a reverent nod.

“Master Yen Sid...”

Donald took a step forward, and Goofy did the same.

“You can count on us to take care of Sora!”

“I would have it no other way. I put Sora in your hands.”

After the sorcerer granted his approval, Sora put his arms around his friends’ shoulders. “Donald! Goofy!”

The two beamed at Sora’s excitement.

“You can’t become a master without us!”

“Huh?” Sora said unhappily. *I mean, he’s right, but—!*

“I never woulda thought you’d fail that exam, Sora,” Goofy commented regretfully.

Sora promptly removed his arms from his friends’ shoulders. “Hey!”

Donald and Goofy weren’t through with their grumpy friend yet, though.

“Face it, you’re just a half-pint.”

“But the three of us together make a whole pint!”

“Pint an’ a *half*,” Sora insisted with exasperation. But this was how they always were.

“We’ll keep an eye on you!” Donald stuck out his hand.

“Oh, this is gonna be lots of fun!” Goofy placed his own hand on Donald’s.

“It’s not a vacation,” Sora said, but he added his hand, too. The three of them grinned.

“Let’s go!” They shared a look, then turned back to face Yen Sid. “Count on us!”

The sorcerer nodded, and they could tell his hopes for them were high.

It had been quite some time since the three of them had ridden the Gummi Ship together, and the Ocean Between had undergone some significant changes since then. Now they had no idea where to go, and no signs to show them the way, either.

“How’re we supposed to get there now?” Sora mused from the cockpit.

“What? I thought you knew!” Donald griped, and kicked his feet in frustration.

“Looks like all the old highways are closed. Didn’t Master Yen Sid say that Sora should trust the guidance his heart gives?” Goofy wondered idly.

“C’mon, Sora! Which way?” Donald prodded.

“Ummmmmm...” Sora thought it over, not in any particular hurry.

“Hey, would you get serious?” Donald jerked forward in his seat.

“Gimme a break, I’m trying. These things take time!” Sora sulked and turned his head away.

Goofy stepped in. “Well, since we’ve already been before,” he offered, “why don’t you try picturing our friends like we’re there?”

“Hmm...”

Sora got to his feet and walked over to Donald and Goofy in the back seats and struck a macho pose.

“Anything?” Donald asked hesitantly, but Sora’s shoulders simply drooped.

“Sorry, I got nothin’. What did you expect?”

Not even thinking of his friends was enough to spark a good idea or change the view from the window.

Seeing Sora’s reaction, Donald was starting to lose heart, too.

Just then, Goofy muttered to himself, ““May your hearts be your guiding key.””

“Huh? What’s that?” asked Sora.

“Master Yen Sid always said that right before we went off on any of our real important adventures.” Goofy’s sharp ears tended to pick up on everything, even whispers.

“Really? Ring a bell?”

Donald shook his head.

“Maybe I just imagined it.” Goofy tilted his head to one side, his confidence waning.

“May my heart be my guiding key...,” Sora repeated. *What’s that supposed to mean? Oh, maybe I should try using my Keyblade!* Sora returned to the pilot’s seat and summoned his Keyblade into his hand. “I’ve got it!”

He held up the Keyblade to the view of the Ocean Between before them, a light shot out from the blade and accessed the Lanes Between.

“A gate!” Donald and Goofy cried out in unison.

“All right! Olympus Coliseum, here we come!” Sora took hold of the controls, and the Gummi Ship was on its way.

Their destination was Olympus, the home of another hero who had once lost his strength and won it back.

Sora and his friends landed halfway up a steep mountain on what might have been a path. They were hemmed in by rock faces and cliffs, so the trail made for a quite a different view than one they knew from their past visits to this world.

“No fanfare?” Sora asked as he warily surveyed his surroundings.

Donald placed his hands to his ears and listened, then shook his head. The roar of the Coliseum was normally audible as soon as they touched down, but there wasn’t even a whisper of it now. They had never even seen this place before.

“Nope, looks like we missed the Coliseum.” Goofy joined in their anxious search of the area.

They had always arrived right near the entrance to the Coliseum, with Cloud

or somebody nearby...

“Sora, *you* opened the gate!”

“I was a little bit off again. Sorry!” Sora tried to placate Donald, then struck his usual pose. “We’ll find him. But we need to go!” He set off straightaway. Uphill seemed like a good place to start.

“Up the mountain?” Donald asked. Sora was merely walking off in a direction; he didn’t even have a map.

“Yeah. ‘Up’ is the usual direction,” Sora replied, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Well, he does tend to have his head in the clouds,” Goofy commented good-naturedly.

“Exactly!” Sora replied confidently, then raised a clenched fist with a grin.

Donald and Goofy shared an exasperated look, then smiled as they realized there was no changing his mind.

“Hey,” Sora called when he had gone a ways ahead of them. “We’re leaving!”

The other two hurried after him.

After a little walking, Goofy noticed something. “I think we might be goin’ in circles,” he said, and just as he did, Heartless appeared in their path. Classic Shadows.

“Heartless!” Donald readied his staff.

“All right, let’s get ‘em!” Sora dashed into the fray with his Keyblade in hand. He may have lost his strength and most of his magic, but he was more than capable of handling these creatures.

Donald slung spells, and Goofy charged forward with his shield at the ready.

Though it had been some time since they fought together as a trio, Sora was reassured having his friends by his side. His Spirit had been a reliable companion, too, but no one could replace Donald and Goofy.

They made their way along the mountain path, defeating Heartless all the while, and eventually arrived at a steep precipice. The view from the cliff

included a city some ways off in the distance. When they tried looking up next, the three friends saw a temple (or something like it) near the summit of the mountain.

“Did I make a turn at the wrong rock?”

Sora folded his arms for a moment, then shouted toward the hills. “Hey, Hercules! Where are youuuu?” He wasn’t really expecting an answer, but hey, no harm in trying.

Just then, an ominous black cloud flowed down from the mountaintop and landed behind Sora and his friends. Before they could figure out how to react to this, they heard a grumpy and distinctly familiar voice.

“All right. I know I dotted my i’s, crossed my t’s, zeroed the hero. So what gives? Who could possibly be trying to give me a migraine by yodeling that yutz’s name?”

The one who appeared from within the black haze was none other than...

“Really? Hades?” Sora muttered, obviously disappointed.

Yes, it was the ruler of the Underworld himself, the unfailingly evil Hades, whose schemes they had thwarted more than a few times in the past.

“Oh, it’s just you. Oy vey.” The Lord of the Dead sounded rather disappointed himself.

“Just us? Even for you that’s cold,” Sora snapped.

“Don’t forget...I can always turn up the heat!” Hades snarled, the blue flames trembling on top of his head.

A little farther away from them, Goofy took another good look around. “Wait. If Hades is here, then where’s Herc?”

“What is everyone’s infatuation with that dolt?!” The blue flames finally flared into an angry red. “You know what? Never mind. Never mind. I’m cool. I’m good. Because...Wonderboy’ll be out of my hair soon enough.” But Hades regained his composure almost immediately, and the red disappeared again as quickly as it had come.

“So you’re up to no good again!” The Lord of the Dead was acting suspiciously

calm, and Sora summoned his Keyblade.

“Of course he is!”

“You bet!”

Donald and Goofy both got their respective weapons into battle positions as well.

“Whoa, easy— What is this, Sparta? Kind of on a schedule. Don’t have time to toss around the old fire and brimstone. The whole cosmos is basically waiting for me to, you know, conquer it!”

Sora sent his Keyblade away. “Poor Hades. He thinks he can actually pull it off this time.” Ridiculous.

But Hades then raised his arms toward the sky.

“Where are my Titans? Show me your power!”

The earth began rumbling in response to his call, while lava erupted from the top of the mountain, and a fierce wind whipped against Sora and his friends.

“Ahh! Love the breeze.”

Hades let the wind turn into a blizzard that washed over him—and sent Sora, Donald, and Goofy flying.

“Whoa!”

“Waaak!”

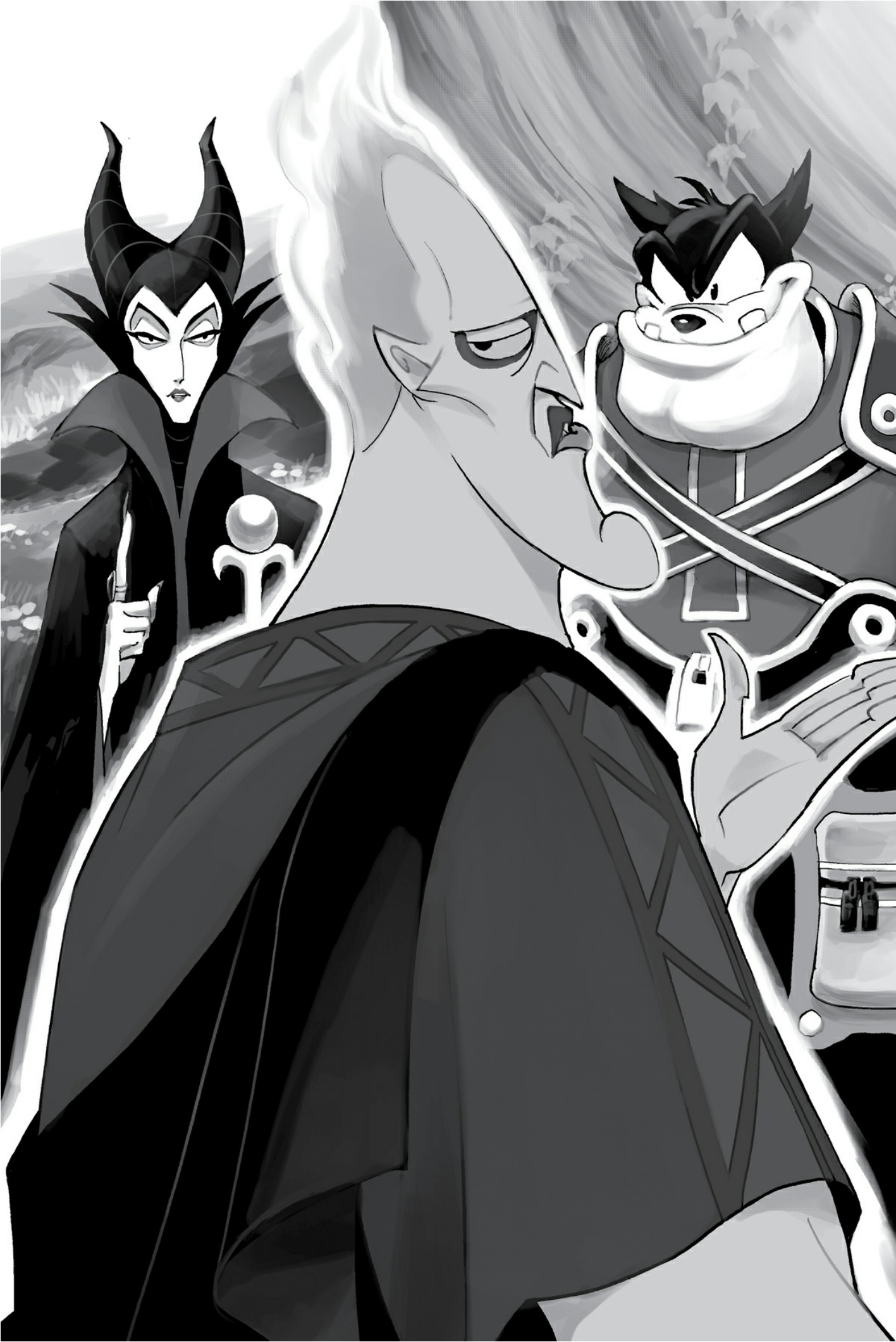
“Yaa-hoo-hoo-hooey!”

The trio cried as they were hurled into the air.

“Ahh. That sent ’em sailing,” a satisfied Hades commented as he followed them with his eyes. “Sailing right to where I left... Eh, no biggie.” He turned around to face three enormous shadows. “Nice work, boys! Now, back to the whole cosmic coup thing?”

The colossal black forms receded at the order, and Hades watched them go. After a few moments, a pool of darkness opened behind him, and someone stepped out.

“Ugh. Really? Are you kidding? Geez Louise. Seriously, when it rains, it pours. Okay, who’s the new pest?” the evil deity asked. He didn’t even turn to face the newcomer, who turned out to be Pete.



“Hey, now, that ain’t no way to say hello, ’specially to your old friends.”

Behind Pete, Mickey’s nefarious nemesis, stood his sinister companion. She greeted Hades with a smirk.

The other figure greeted Hades with a sneer when he finally turned back to face them and said, “Oh, perfect. Now I gotta put up with you two,” Hades grumbled, turning back toward them.

“Funny, I don’t remember you doing me any memorable favors. So, you can keep your Heartless this time. I’m going back to my original plan. All right?”

Maleficent, the black-robed fairy, laughed.

“So...toodle-oo! Exit’s thataway. Hey, it was great seein’ ya! Happy trails!”

Hades shooed them away with his hands, but Maleficent had a question for him: “We are not here for you. I have my own business to attend to. All I need to know is if there is a distinctive black box somewhere in this world?”

“Black box, huh? Hmm... Black box, black box, black box... Wait. Don’t tell me... You’re after the one Zeus hid on Earth?” Hades replied, suggesting he had some knowledge of the item the evil fairy was trying to find.

“Possibly. If I were, where might it be?”

Maleficent’s eyes narrowed with deep interest.

Meanwhile...

The tempest had blown Sora and his friends some ways away.

“Whoa!”

“Waaak!”

“Yaa-hoo-hoo-hooey!”

In Thebes, the hero Hercules looked up as he heard the three screaming voices, and with a mighty leap, he caught the falling trio in his brawny arms.

“See? Found him,” Sora declared proudly from Hercules’s biceps.

“Yeah, guess this counts!” said Goofy, who was also dangling from Herc’s arms.

“Gwaaak!” Apparently, Donald had been caught by one of the nearby statues instead. “Get me down!”

“Just a second!” Hercules laughed as he ran to help.

Once Sora and gang were safely on the ground, Herc smiled, delighted to see his friends again.

“You guys are here! Sora, Donald, Goofy! You literally dropped in. Gotta say, I’m impressed.”

“Thanks!”

“Liked the catch.”

“Yeah, thanks, Herc.”

The trio each greeted him in turn. It was great to see their friend was still doing well after all this time—although judging by the smoke rising among the stone buildings of its streets, it appeared the same couldn’t be said for Thebes.

“But...what’s going on?” Sora asked.

“Take a guess,” Hercules said with a shrug. “Starts with an *H*.” Hades and his evil cohorts occasionally tried to wreck the city, and it was Herc who usually put a stop to it.

“Ah, I get the picture,” Sora replied. “Actually, we bumped into the H-ster on the way here.”

“He said somethin’ about conquerin’ the whole cosmos,” Donald added.

“All of it, huh? Nice of him to show a little self-restraint. Well, whatever he’s planning, I’ll send him running back across the Styx.”

“That’s our Herc!” Sora cheered at his friend’s confidence. *Hercules really has the stuff heroes are made of.*

“So, Sora, is there a reason you guys are visiting? I’m guessing it’s not just for the cheese and olives,” Herc asked, sensing something out of the ordinary.

“Oh yeah!” Sora exclaimed as he remembered his mission.

“It sounds like somebody forgot,” Donald teased.

“That’s Sora,” said Goofy.

“I just...took my time remembering,” Sora said back to his friends, then turned to look at Hercules. “Herc, I came here so I could ask you something.”

“Ask me?”

“Yeah. Do you remember the last time we were together? You were feeling down and out. How’d you get your strength back—when you jumped in and saved Meg?”

Sora gazed at his hands, now so much weaker than they used to be. Hercules had once been robbed of his might due to one of Hades’s schemes. If Herc had successfully come back from that, then surely he knew something that could help Sora with his own plight.

“Hmm... That’s tough.” Hercules paused in thought for a moment. “All I know is that she was in trouble. Suddenly, I wanted to save her with all my heart, but...it’s not like I could tell you how.”

He did his best to explain his actions back then, but even he wasn’t certain what the key to his recovery really was. Maybe Sora’s magic cure to regain his strength wasn’t going to be that easy to find after all.

“Oh man.” Sora sighed, dejected.

“What’s wrong?” Herc asked.

“All my strength is gone, too. That’s why I need you—because I was hoping you might have a solution, or something.”

“I’m sorry, Sora.”

Several fireballs shot down from the sky toward the four disheartened friends.

“Heartless!” shouted Donald.

They were shrouded in flames, coming to attack the city.

“Let’s talk later!”

“Right... Once we’ve dealt with these guys.”

The four of them got themselves ready for the battle. They had fought

alongside Herc several times before and were well aware of his strength.

Just before Sora was about to charge into the pack of Heartless, Hercules yelled, "I'll handle these guys!"

The hero hefted a big stone from among the rubble and hurled it at the Heartless. Donald cast spells, and Goofy sent foes scattering with his shield.

"Yowch!" Goofy yelped as his clothes caught fire, and Donald rushed over to put him out with ice magic.

I could take these guys out in a heartbeat if I were just...stronger, thought Sora as he swung his Keyblade desperately. Herc had said his power returned to him because of his sincere desire to help Meg, but what exactly did that mean?

"Sora, look out!"

Donald blasted away a Heartless that had been bearing down on Sora.

"Where's your head?!"

"Sorry 'bout that."

Sora tightened his grip on his Keyblade and turned his attention back to the business at hand.

"You okay there, Sora?" Herc shouted from where he was punching Heartless into the air.

"The real question is, are *you*?" Sora replied, as he swung his blade. He was putting up a front, just a little bit.

"Herc!" someone called from above just as they finally managed to finish off the swarm.

Megara and Phil flew down astride Pegasus and landed before them. Megara was Hercules's girlfriend, and he usually just called her Meg, just like how she called him Herc. Phil was the trainer who had made Herc into a hero.

"You're okay!"

"Meg!"

She walked over to Hercules.

“How’ve you been?” Donald asked Phil.

“I got two words for you—right as rain!”

Donald and Goofy shared a look, perplexed as always by the satyr’s apparent inability to count.

“Boy, that didn’t look fun.”

“No, not with the Heartless involved.”

Hercules crossed his arms and surveyed the city. Several stone buildings were damaged; even his own statue had toppled to the ground.

“We’re just lucky our friends showed up,” he said with a bright smile at the friends in question.

“Well, whaddaya know? Sora, Donald, Goofy, guess I owe you a big thank-you,” Meg said, blinking her long lashes.

“It was nothing,” Sora told her proudly.

“Meg, you need to stay someplace safe. We’ll search the city and make sure everyone manages to get clear of the fire.”

The danger wasn’t over yet. Meg nodded and clasped her hands with concern over her heart. “Be careful, Wonderboy.”

“I will,” the hero replied reassuringly, then turned to Sora, Goofy, and Donald. “So, you guys in?” He grinned.

“Of course we’re in!” Sora flexed his muscles in reply.

“We’re heroes!” Donald added.

“Mm-hmm!” Goofy chimed in.

Megara smiled gently and said, “Break a leg, then...heroes.”

“You betcha!” the trio exclaimed with a nod.

Hercules turned to the satyr. “Phil, you should go with Meg.” Megara climbed aboard Pegasus, with Phil following her. “You gotta keep her safe.” Herc patted his trusted companion on the snout, and then with a whinny, the winged horse took flight. As he rose high into the air, they heard a scream.

“Heeelp!”

Goofy raised one of his ears and then pointed at a big building off in the distance. “Hey! I hear a voice!”

Hercules strained his eyes as he searched for its owner. “Oh no! There’s a little girl caught in the fire!”

The girl was crying on top of the crumbling roof of a temple.

“Let’s go!” Sora called, about to set off at a sprint, but Herc stopped him.

“Wait. Running’s too slow!”

He was right—to reach her, they would have to go around the temple square, up the building’s stairs, and then scale the side to reach the roof.

“Then what’s the other choice?” Sora asked back in panic.

“Get on that.” Hercules pointed at the statue of himself that lay fallen in the plaza.

“What do you mean?”

Hercules set Sora, Donald, and Goofy atop the statue and then, in an incredible display of strength, lifted the entire thing over his head as if he meant to throw it.

“Hyaah...!”

“Oh no! Not agaaaaain!”

Herc’s roar of effort was nearly drowned out by the screaming trio as he sent the statue hurtling through the air.

“Thank you for saving me.”

“Yeah, no prob,” Sora replied gently. The girl bobbed her head and ran off. Luckily, they had arrived in time to get her to safety. *I gotta say, Herc never fails to impress. If only I could get my strength back, too...*

“We’d better check and see if anyone else needs us.”

I’m sure there are more people in trouble, thought Sora. Just as he was about to hurry off, a familiar voice called from behind.

“Well, if it isn’t Sora and the king’s pawns.”

Them again—Maleficent and Pete.

Sora readied his Keyblade for a fight, and Donald and Goofy prepared themselves for action, too.

“Maleficent! Pete! Are you the reason the Heartless are here?”

“Certainly not,” the witch replied nonchalantly.

Beside her, Pete gave Sora a once-over and jabbed a finger at him. “Say, Maleficent, I dunno about his sidekicks, but Kid Keyblader here looks way punier than the last time we saw him. I say we finish him off while we still can.”

Hearing that from *Pete* of all people was just adding insult to injury...

Maleficent regarded Sora closely, then smiled softly. “Waste no time with the boy,” she said dismissively, leisurely turning to be on her way. “He’s inconsequential. We have a far more pressing matter to attend to.”

“Oh! We gots to find that black box.”

“Be silent, you fool!” she snapped, but Pete had already spilled the beans about their search. She sneered down at Sora and his companions with utter confidence. “As for you three: We shall meet again...when I have time for such trifles.”

“Yeah, and youse better get your act together before then. Later, twerps!” Pete stepped into the Corridor of Darkness opening before him, and Maleficent followed.

“Wait!” Sora was about to give chase—but his footsteps slowed.

“Sora?” Donald looked worriedly into his friend’s face.

“It’s fine. Happens all the time!” Sora chirped again, then let out a long sigh.

“Gawrsh, it sure don’t sound like it. Did Pete sayin’ mean things bother ya?” Goofy added quietly.

“It’s fine! This happens all the time!” Sora repeated, as if he was trying to convince himself it was true.

I’ve lost my strength more than once before, and everything worked out.

There's no reason to believe it won't come back again...I hope.

"You're gonna get stronger!" Donald said in encouragement.

"You'll be just fine! This sure ain't the first time it's happened!" Goofy joined in, quoting Sora's own words.

"Don't say that!" Sora protested, a hint of a smile on his face. *They're right. I can handle it.* "Let's go look for people who haven't made it out!" he called to Donald and Goofy. He was ready to go again.

Unfortunately, the fires all around the city made navigating the streets unusually difficult—at least, until Goofy got the bright idea to ride on his shield through the obstacles.

He came across a woman trapped on top of a column by fiery Heartless while he was on the move.

"Someone, heelp! Where did all these monsters come from? Hercules, where are you?!"

"Help is on the way!" Sora ran over and whacked one of the creatures with his Keyblade. "We'll put these hotheads out! Hang on up there!"

"Huh? Who are you three? Where is Hercules?" the woman asked.

"Hey, we're heroes, too!" Donald declared with pride as he blasted them with magic. Sora cast a few water spells of his own, but he could feel the difference. He was weaker than before, and not by a small amount.

How am I supposed to get back to how I was...?

"Sora! Stay focused!" Donald shouted.

"Look out!" Goofy called.

"Ack, sorry..."

Sora tried to concentrate on what he was doing with his Keyblade instead.

After they'd dealt with the last of the Heartless, he hurried to the woman. Luckily, she didn't appear to be injured.

"Thank you," she said. "You're so kind. Keep training and one day you'll be great heroes like Hercules." She ran away to someplace safe.

“Keep training’? Is it that obvious?”

“Just for you,” Donald quipped before Sora could fall into a slump again.

“Hey!”

Goofy tried a more positive approach. “I think we all have a ways to go. But we’ll get there together!”

Yeah, I know we will, but...

A sudden tremor interrupted his thoughts, and then he spotted a building in the distance that was about to collapse.

“Wak!”

“Let’s go!”

Sora and his friends hurried for the crumbling structure. When they arrived, they found someone holding up a portion of its stone ceiling to protect those who hadn’t made it outside in time.

“Herc!”

“Sora!”

More chunks of the roof came falling down around Hercules and the locals he was protecting. The whole place would’ve come down without him—and to make matters worse, more fiery Heartless had arrived.

“More Heartless!”

“You take them. We need to save these people!” shouted Hercules, but he couldn’t move. They were really in trouble now!

Sora summoned his Keyblade to his hand. “Herc, can you hold the building?” he called

“No problem!” Herc replied heartily.

“Donald. Goofy. We gotta do this quick!” Sora went after the Heartless with his Keyblade, not even waiting for his friends to respond.

We have to get rid of these guys so the people can escape. I may be weaker than before, but I can handle them at least and buy us some time.

Sora had to pull out all the stops, but he took down his foes one by one.

With Donald and Goofy fighting alongside him, they dispersed the pack a little at a time. Once the final Heartless was gone, they returned to Hercules. He was still pouring all his effort into keeping the building from collapsing.

“Get the people out!”

“Okay!” Sora ushered the huddled group of townsfolk toward the entrance. “Are you guys all right? You need to get to safety. Go! Quickly!”

“C’mon, we gotta hurry!” Goofy cried out.

The crowd of children and adults ran out of the building, while Sora took a small girl by the hand and hurried after them.

“Did everybody make it out?” Donald asked worriedly, just as the building finally gave up the ghost.

“Hercules!” everyone cried in unison.

Sora, Donald, Goofy, and the citizens he had saved all gazed at the rubble of the building with apprehension. It might have only been a few minutes—maybe even a few seconds—but for everyone there, it felt like an eternity.

But then...

Hercules slowly emerged from the clouds of dust and smoke.

“You scared us!” Sora cried with relief.

“It’s nothing. That’s what *these* are for.” Hercules flexed, striking his trademark macho pose.

Herc is so cool! I need to get strong again, too, and fast!

The wish burned in Sora’s heart. Elated that Herc was okay, Donald and Goofy struck their own heroic poses.

But then a Corridor of Darkness opened beyond the fading haze.

“Oh, wow! Very nice, full marks.” A man in a black coat stood clapping his hands in an exaggerated show of praise.

“Go away!” Donald shouted at the unexpected guest.

“No Organization!” Goofy added.

The man had a long ponytail streaked with white, a patch covering one eye, and a scar on his cheek—this was Xigbar, the former Number 2 of the Organization. “All this altruism is giving me the warm and fuzzies. So then, does having a heart of light come with an extremely good insurance policy?”

“Just say what you mean.” Sora called his Keyblade. He wasn’t a fan of the mocking tone.

“Oh, but I did, though,” Xigbar retorted. He wasn’t through making cynical remarks. “No good will ever come from putting other people first.”

“I was able to save Meg’s life because I was ready to risk my own,” Hercules retorted sternly, but Xigbar just shrugged.

“Because you’ve got friends in high places, you mean. Tricks like that don’t fly for your average joe.”

“What do you know?” said Sora. “You weren’t even there! If you were, you’d admire Herc’s courage.”

Xigbar snorted. “I don’t admire one guy leaping into danger if it means someone else might have to jump in to save him. You’re all just lining up to lose out. Dooming others to take the fall with ya. Oh, and you can spare me the usual party line. Yes, hearts are powerful when they’re connected. But if you put too much of that power in one place, some of those hearts might end up breaking.” During his speech, Xigbar strolled past Sora and his friends, then turned and pointed at Sora. “Still, Sora, that doesn’t mean you should change.” His golden eye gazed intently at him. “Accept the power you’re given. Find the hearts joined to yours.”

“Why would I ever take advice from *you*?” Sora couldn’t stop himself from shouting back.

Didn’t Xigbar do something similar the last time we fought Organization XIII? He told me to keep defeating Heartless. Yeah, he tried to trick me that way before, too. But everyone helped me back then, so I’m sure things won’t be any different this time.

“As if! You don’t have any choice but to follow this sweet little trail of bread

crumbs. And at the end, you'll finally realize what destiny has in store for you. In fact, your reward might be right around the corner. You're so close!"

Xigbar's lips twisted into a sneer. He summoned a Corridor of Darkness and melted away into it just as suddenly as he had arrived.

Sora stared at his hands. *He was talking about...* "Hearts breaking? Whose hearts?"

"Sora, don't let him bother you," Hercules reassured him, and Sora looked up. "He's just trying to get under your skin 'cause he thinks he can. We'll show him that our sacrifices haven't been for nothing."

Yeah, Herc has a point. "You're right!" Sora looked over his comrades in arms, Donald and Goofy, with a smile.

"Mm-hmm! Besides, we're already proof enough," said Goofy, calm and composed.

Donald added, "We're a team! When we're together, we can do anything!"

"Yeah!" Sora replied confidently, and then they all set off to walking.

Yep, my friends are my power, after all. Maybe I'm not as good in a fight as before, but as long as I have them... Wait.

Sora turned back to where Xigbar had vanished.

What did he mean, "reward"...?

Sora was making his way forward, defeating Heartless with Hercules by his side, when Pegasus landed before them with Megara and Phil on his back.

"Nice job, Wonderboy. We checked the whole area. It looks like everyone's safe."

"That's great. We did what we could." Hercules smiled at Megara as she hopped off Pegasus.

"You heroes have been busy little bees," she commented.

Sora beamed with pride at the praise—but only for an instant, until Meg's eyes flicked over to something in the distance. "Oh... Look. More trouble!" She sounded worried. She was looking at the faraway mountain—at the dark clouds

gathering around it.

Wait, isn't that where we just came from...? And those black clouds—

"It's Hades," Hercules declared.

I bet he was up to no good again while we were busy fighting in the city.

"Herc! Let's go!"

"Right."

It wasn't time to rest just yet.

As they reached the base of the mountain, they could feel the shaking and hear the rumbling.

"Wak!"

Donald leaped into the air in alarm. Small stones came rolling down from the dark clouds around the summit.

"This sure does feel awfully familiar...," Goofy commented as he surveyed what lay above.

Sora nodded and said, "Yeah, just like before."

The last time the air had felt like this, Hades had flung them all the way to Herc.

"Guys, this is getting worse by the minute. I hope I'm wrong, but my family may need me." Hercules looked at the summit of the mountain with stern eyes. "Sora, I'm gonna fly ahead. You've been a big help, but...leave the rest to me." He whistled and called Pegasus down from the sky, then mounted and prepared to depart.

"Family?" Sora asked curiously.

"Yeah. Dad's king of the gods," Herc replied, just as Pegasus soared off into the heavens.

King of the gods? After thinking about it for a moment, Sora let out a cry of surprise. "*Whaaaat?!*"

Donald and Goofy were just as stunned.

“His father is a god? But doesn’t that mean Herc is a god, too?”

“I think it does.” Goofy was still staring at the sky in amazement, even though Pegasus was gone.

“No wonder he’s so strong!” Donald was doing the same.

He and Goofy looked at each other and said, “Then he’ll be okay.”

“Won’t he?”

Sora was quick to shoot down the idea. “No. Organization XIII’s here. He’ll need our help.”

Herc might be a muscly, all-powerful god or whatever, but there’s no way I can just leave him hanging. Maybe I’m not as strong as him, but the three of us working together should be able to help him out.

“Good point. We gotta go!”

“Cause heroes never quit.”

Yeah, they’re right. We can be heroes, too! Herc said he got his strength back because he wanted to save Meg with all his heart. So maybe if I want to save someone with all my heart...

Another tremor brought Sora out of his thoughts and made him stumble. Small rocks were tumbling down from above—along with huge boulders, too!

“Whoa!”

Sora leaped back to avoid one of the larger rocks and directed his eyes upward. At the top of the ledge, he spotted a giant made of pitch-black stone—the Rock Titan—bellowing down at them. But “rock” didn’t even begin to cover it; it was more of a mountain in its own right. The Rock Titan swung its fist at a nearby boulder and smashed it to pieces, which came raining down the cliff. They would have to dodge the stony hail on the way up.

“C’mon!” Sora shouted as he began to hurry up the precipice. One of the boulders managed to hit home and sent them tumbling headlong down the cliff, which was already starting to break, too. To make matters worse, the dark clouds surrounding the summit opened up with rain.

“Gwawak!”

“Look out, Sora!” Goofy brought up his shield to protect his two companions.

“Thanks, Goofy.”

“Don’t mention it.” Goofy puffed his chest out proudly, imitating Hercules after he had saved the townsfolk.

“Okay, first thing’s first: Let’s get rid of that blockhead!”

Sora finished climbing up to where the Rock Titan stood. *I’ll start with the legs.* They looked as hard as...well, rock, but Sora whacked them with his Keyblade all the same. The Titan nearly crushed Sora with a stomp, but he was able to dodge it.

“Sora, be careful!” Donald cast a healing spell.

“Over here, Sora!” Goofy called.

Sora picked up the pace and darted between the Rock Titan’s legs alongside his friend, hitting them until they finally brought the monster to its knees. Goofy held up his shield, and Sora ran up and vaulted off it high into the air.

As if he were climbing a mountain, Sora scrambled from the Rock Titan’s shoulder to its head and started hammering with the Keyblade.

The Rock Titan let out a roar and then fell still at last.

“Yes! That’s one down!”

Just a little bit farther to the summit.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy hurried up the trail and passed through a cave. When they reached the other side, they found a long set of stairs to a gate set between colossal Greek columns. Beyond them was an enormous, majestic temple wreathed in golden clouds.

“Is this...Olympus?”

Sora and his companions stood in a large open plaza among rows of columns decorated with gold.

“Gawrsh, it’s amazing!”

A sound like trumpets reached their ears as Goofy looked about in wonder. It sounded a lot like something they used to hear at the Coliseum—

“The fanfare?” Donald asked.

“Nope!” Sora replied, preparing for action with his Keyblade.

Just as he had suspected, they were met by a large pack of goatlike Heartless—Satyrs. They got into formation and made a beeline for Sora and his friends.

“Uh-oh!”

Sora couldn’t get in a single attack, and the phalanx sent him sprawling helplessly across the ground. Donald and Goofy met with similar results.

“Over here, Sora!” Goofy called Sora over to hide behind his shield with Donald, while the unit of Satyrs ran together through the plaza. If the trio attacked without a plan, they’d bounce right off again.

“What should we do?” Donald asked in a worried voice.

“Hmm... If only there was some way we could break through that group.”

After pondering the question for a moment behind the shield, Sora came up with an idea.

He would never be able to pull it off on his own, though.

Sora whispered his idea to Goofy and Donald.

“That sounds like it just might do the trick,” Goofy said with a nod, glancing over at the Satyrs.

“I’m sure it will!” Donald brandished his staff.

“Okay, it’s go time!”

At Sora’s signal, Goofy crouched down with his shield held over his head. Sora hopped onto the shield, while Donald climbed up on his shoulders.

“Wak!”

He sprang high into the air from his perch on Sora and fired off a spell into the center of the Heartless, sending them into disarray for a fraction of a second. Then it was Goofy’s turn to jump, and at the peak of his arc through the air,

Sora dove right into the middle of the broken formation to break it apart from the inside out.

And just as they planned, the enemy unit crumbled.

“We did it!” Donald swung his staff about with glee.

Now all that was left to do was take down the Satyrs one at a time, and the trio wasted no time doing just that.

The Satyrs had proven to be a real handful all together, but individually they were a piece of cake.

And it’s the opposite, too—even when you can’t win fighting separately, joining together might give you a shot.

Sora and his friends gave one another high fives once the last of Heartless were beaten.

“My magic saves the day again!”

“No way; did you see that dive-bomb?”

“You both looked pretty cool to me.” Goofy praised his two boastful friends in his usual easygoing voice—and just then, the ground shuddered with another ominous tremor.

“We’ve got to hurry!”

They pushed farther on into Olympus.

The throne of Olympus sat high in the heavens of Mount Olympus’s peak, and under normal circumstances, its beauty and splendor would be unparalleled.

Now, however...

Hercules doing battle with the Heartless from astride Pegasus, while the one sitting in the seat of power was not his father, Zeus, but Hades. As for the throne itself, the Lord of the Dead had gone to the trouble of creating his own. The original had been buried in the red-hot flow from the Lava Titan’s mouth, along with Zeus himself, and trapped there as the Ice Titan’s frigid breath hardened the stone.

“I swear to you, Hades, when I get out of th—”

“No, I’m the one giving orders now, bolt boy.”

It wasn’t long before Zeus completely disappeared into the rocky prison, and Hades crossed his legs on his throne as if he were already the king of Olympus.

But then Hercules came flying down, spurring Pegasus on faster.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Hades!”

The ruler of the Underworld jumped up from his seat.

“We’re gonna stop you!” Sora added as he, Donald, and Goofy joined the fray.

Hercules shattered the chains that had bound the other gods and set them free.

Hades’s confident pose vanished as he rose to his feet with a snarl, his blue flames instantly flaring up into a bright red. “Get them!”

The Tornado Titan with its typhoon-like winds joined the Ice and Lava Titans, and together they set their sights on the newcomers.

“Sora, Donald, Goofy! It’s on!” Hercules shouted, leaping down from Pegasus.

“Yeah!” Sora responded by getting his Keyblade ready.

The Tornado Titan had whirled high into the air to watch the battle for now, so they would be dealing with the other two Titans first. The combined molten and frozen breaths had produced a huge stone mass capable of imprisoning the god Zeus himself, so Sora and his allies played it safe and kept their distance, dodging to the side when necessary.

It looked like the only way to shut the two behemoths down would be to attack their legs, just as they had with the Rock Titan on the way here.

“Ack!” Sora stumbled as a boulder whizzed by.

“You okay there, Sora?” Hercules called. “I think you’ll have better luck with their heads than their legs. And I know the fastest way up!”

“Huh?”

“Leave it to me, Sora!”

Hercules lifted Sora into the air, then took him by the legs and began whirling

around faster and faster—until he finally tossed him right at the Ice Titan’s head.

“Whoa!!”

It was just like when Herc had launched the statue so they could save the girl. Sora managed to right himself in midair and crashed down onto the Ice Titan’s head with his Keyblade. Hercules and the other two were fighting to immobilize the Lava Titan down on the ground, so they were trusting Sora to take care of things here.

“Okay!”

Sora whacked at the Ice Titan’s head with his Keyblade until eventually the light faded from its eyes.

“Now this one, Sora!”

Herc, Goofy, and Donald had managed to stop the Lava Titan in its tracks, so Sora jumped off the Ice Titan and onto its head for a good hit with his Keyblade.

But that was when the Tornado Titan started creating a powerful gale farther above, pulling Sora up into the wind.

He was going to have to take care of this Titan on his own.

I may not be that strong right now, but it’s no biggie— I’ve still got my friends down on the ground.

Leaping between the pieces of rubble suspended in the air with him, Sora made his way over to the Tornado Titan. First, he hit it with some magic to stun it, then he got up close and personal with his Keyblade. He attacked desperately, but the powerful wind made it difficult to keep his eyes open. Still, he refused to falter. *I can’t give up.*

When the Tornado Titan’s winds faded away, Sora fell back to earth and into Hercules’s arms.

“Sora!”

“Thanks, Herc.”

Despite being temporarily immobilized, the three Titans still had them

hemmed in—and then the Rock Titan climbed up from below to join them.

“Wawawak!”

“Uh-oh! Now it’s all four of them!”

Donald and Goofy shared a nervous glance.

“So what? There are four of us, too,” Sora said to rally his friends. It *was* a worrying development, though.

“Actually, I think I can make it five,” Herc reassured them with a grin. He climbed onto the mass of stone imprisoning Zeus on the throne and ripped it apart. With a blinding flash of light, the king of the gods was free.

Hades jumped up in terror from his makeshift throne.

Zeus took his son by the shoulders. “Thank you, my boy,” he said, then called bolts of lightning to his hands. “Hah! Now watch your old man work!”

When the bolts struck the Rock Titan in both of its heads, the other Titans turned tail and fled.

The Tornado Titan straggled behind the others, giving Hercules time to grab hold of its whirlwind body. He spun around and hurled it into the air, just like he had done to Sora, and the winds pulled its brethren along with it. When they reached the depths of space, they all exploded.

Zeus roared with laughter and high-fived his son.

“We did it!” Sora cried.

Meanwhile, Hades wallowed in despair as he watched his plan fall apart. “I can’t believe it! I put eighteen years into that plan and you blippin’ ruined it! I *really* don’t like you.”

“Just give it up already. You’ll never beat Herc, no matter how many times you try,” Sora retorted, a little exasperated.

“Yeah,” said Goofy, “stay in the Underworld where ya belong.”

“Go have the time of your afterlife,” Donald added.

“Enough already! I did not come this far to be ridiculed by Zeussy high and mighty, his little sunspot, and a trio of clowns!” Hades’s head flared so brightly

red it seemed ready to burst. “You know what? I’ll just go ahead and destroy you!”

It looked like the Lord of the Dead was still ready to rumble, and so were Sora and his friends.

But then—

“Hades.”

The furious god whirled to face the voice.

“The exit is that way,” Hercules informed him, and the sight of Zeus standing behind his son broke Hades’s spirit for good. His hair returned to normal, and the ruler of the Underworld trudged wearily but obediently toward the exit.

“Hold on. I almost forgot.”

Hades looked back just in time to receive a punch from Herc. So much for getting off with a warning.

“That one’s for trying to wreck Thebes.”

Hades scrambled backward on his hands and knees. Ever the sore loser, he shouted, “You’ll pay for this! I have a very, very long memory!” Black smoke began swirling around him as he made his escape. “I can still dunk your little Nut-Meg in a river of de—”

Zeus fired off a lightning bolt into the smoke to finally send the Lord of the Dead and his unwise parting words on their not-so-merry way.

Sora and his friends descended the steps from the realm of the gods with Hercules, who looked back reluctantly.

“Are you sure you want to leave all this behind?” Sora asked him with a hint of worry.

Goofy and Donald felt the same.

“Isn’t Olympus your home?”

“And your family?”

Hercules shook his head. “I can see my family any time I want. If I stayed, I’d have to be apart from the person I love most... And that life would be empty.”

His eyes landed on Megara, who was waiting at the bottom of the steps. “I finally know where I belong.”

With that, Hercules ran down to Megara and took her in his arms.

“Hercules...,” she murmured in his embrace.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy walked down the steps toward them, and Hercules turned back around as if he’d suddenly remembered something. “Sora, we never got back to your question. How can I help you?”

“Mmm, it’s okay.” Sora shook his head. “I think I’m meant to figure it out for myself. I’ll find my strength the way you found yours. Something to fight for... with all my heart,” he said, then smiled.

He wanted to hold on to that feeling more than ever now—that drive to help his friends.

I want to help my friends who fight alongside me, who cheer me up when I’m down, who stay near and dear to my heart.

Maybe I don’t have my strength back yet, but I’ll be fine as long as I never let that feeling go.

“I guess you did have the answer!”

“Well, you’ve got heart, Sora. Just keep at it and I know you’ll be stronger than ever,” Hercules said with certainty.

“Yeah, I might even end up stronger than you are.”

“There he goes again.” Donald groaned as Sora copied Herc’s macho pose.

For a moment afterward, Olympus was filled with laughter.

Meanwhile, down in a Heartless-free Thebes...

“Are you sure this box with the Book of Prophecies is for reals? I think that dingbat in black was pulling your leg,” Pete grumbled wearily as he drove a shovel into the ground.

Maleficent crossed her arms and snapped, “Be quiet and dig, you imbecile. I must find that Book of Prophecies and make it my own. His was the only clue we have. We cannot afford to dismiss it without a thorough investigation.”

“I’m just sayin’, a shot in the dark ain’t gonna get us any closer to— Ooh?” Pete’s complaint trailed off as he struck something hard. “Wow!”

Maleficent craned her head in his direction. “What is it? Have you found something? Show me at once, fool.”

Pete was holding a purple box. “Yes, sireesy, this has gotta be that Pandora’s Box Hades mentioned.”

The witch’s eyes narrowed as she inspected the box. “Leave it,” she finally snapped.

“What? After all that diggin’?”

“That is not the box that I desire. We are finished with this world. Come.”

“Awwwww...”

As they left, someone was watching them from atop a building.

Xigbar whispered to himself, “May your hea—”

Shortly before Sora’s visit to Hercules, Riku, Mickey, and Kairi had been listening to Yen Sid in the Mysterious Tower.

“The great battle with Xehanort is almost upon us. As you know, we must take action to keep the seven pure lights safe, and thus we must hasten to assemble the seven guardians of light. It is time to return to our world the three Keyblade wielders we lost over a decade ago. Ventus, Terra, and Aqua must be saved from their sad end, for they have more to achieve. Following their first battle with Xehanort, Ventus’s heart refused to awaken, and so Aqua found a safe location to conceal him. But when she set off in search of her missing other friend, Terra, she fell to a place from which there is no return without outside help,” the sorcerer explained, then closed his large eyes and fell into silent thought.

Mickey nodded. “I saw her. In the realm of darkness,” he said, beginning his tale.



Chapter 2

DARK WORLD

Chapter 2

Dark World

SHE DIDN'T KNOW HOW FAR SHE'D WANDERED through the endless darkness. It didn't matter where she was, whether in a forest or on a mountaintop.

There was no passage of time here in the Dark World; all she knew was she had been walking for so, so long. She had no idea how much time had passed back in the worlds of light. All she could do was keep trudging forward.

Aqua raised her head, surprised to see a castle she recognized among the gloomy, alien sights.

"Could it be?" She gasped. That was the castle where Cinderella had met Prince Charming.

Why would Cinderella's world be in this dark realm...?

The large clock on one of the castle's towers was stopped at midnight—the moment when Cinderella's magic wore off.

As Aqua started walking toward it, monsters suddenly appeared, barring her way. The foes down here weren't the Unversed she had once fought. Aqua summoned her Keyblade and swung it, casting a spell. Her strength hadn't faded, exactly, but she was exhausted from her endless journey.

The creatures dispersed into nothingness.

If this castle isn't an illusion, it could mean something's wrong in the realm of light. As Aqua walked closer, the road in front of her became more and more fractured. She would have to make her way forward across barely traversable wreckage.

Even down here, the castle was still shining with light. It was like the darkness had swallowed it whole.

Her chest fluttered.

In all her time walking, Aqua had never encountered a single building to serve as a landmark, but now, that had changed.

Now, she had the castle.

Aqua continued down the broken path, and more monsters barred her way. Maybe they were excited at this new development, too.

Aqua looked back and saw a whole mess of buildings just as warped and twisted as the road.

The whole castle town must have been swallowed by this world—just as I was.

Everyone in this world thought they were safe. Not just the people...but the dog waiting for his owner...the cat curled up in her nook... So much life. Trees and flowers... There's no deeper sadness than discovering all that you knew is gone. The grief in this place is too much to fathom.

Aqua clenched her fist.

I must press onward— Nothing will come of looking backward. As she tried to encourage herself, the ground beneath her crumbled again, until there was nothing left of the road to the castle, while the hands of the clocktower began to turn. Time was moving, but now she had no way forward.

A lone gear lay nearby.

There is no "time" in the Dark World, but maybe—

When Aqua tapped the gear with her Keyblade, it glowed and began rotating, both winding back the time of the castle's clock and restoring the broken road.

How wonderful it would be to be able to reverse time like this. To spend one more night beneath the stars with my best friends.

Aqua raised her eyes toward the sky, a deep black expanse without the smallest glimmer of starlight.

She thought back to that night before their Mark of Mastery exam.

I wish the three of us could go stargazing again, and look for shooting stars.

Aqua resumed her course toward the castle, wondering why her mind kept

drifting back to those bygone days. *I mustn't dwell on the past—I mustn't give in to the darkness. I have to keep moving forward.*

Aqua made her way toward the castle, defeating whatever monsters attacked her.

When she reached the plaza in front of the castle, she looked behind her and saw that this distorted world was still part of the realm of darkness. She hadn't made it back home after all.

"Aqua."

She knew that voice.

She spun around. *Terra.*

Sure enough, he was descending the steps of the castle.

"It can't be. What are you doing here?" she asked as he approached. *My chest feels tight— I thought I sent you back.* "You should be in the realm of light. Oh no! Did you not make it out?"

Or did something happen there...?

Terra only stood in front of her, smiling gently.

"Why won't you say anything to me?" Aqua reached out to Terra, but her hand passed through him. "So what are you, a memory among these shadows? Are you here to...try to tell me not to lose heart?" she murmured as her friend vanished into light.

This is all a vision. The world keeps our thoughts alive. But where did the people who lived here go once their world was taken away? At least they're not here. So, they haven't fallen to darkness. I'll take what solace I can from that.

Aqua entered the castle, but instead of the great hall, she found a forest.

This world—it was Snow White's. Has it been lost to darkness, too?

Out of the corner of her eye, Aqua spied a glass coffin, the very same one the young princess had slept in. When she hurried over to it, she saw someone inside.

"Ven?!"

She called his name, but Ven soon disappeared in a flash of light.

Another illusion.

“Ven. What did you come here to tell me?” Aqua gazed softly at the empty casket.

I know I promised to wake you up. I’m sorry. But I have to find a way home before I can help you. I just want you to know that it’s been you who keeps my heart strong. Keeps the dark away.

Aqua quickly turned around as she sensed a presence behind her. It was an enormous mirror—more memories.

That’s right. This is the mirror I saw in Snow White’s castle.

Aqua saw herself reflected in the glass—and then the young woman inside reached out for the real Aqua and yanked her through the surface.

The world within was the great hall of the castle, where the mirror used to be, but now there were so many mirrors that Aqua struggled to keep her bearings. She didn’t know which one she had come through anymore.

All she could see in any of them was herself.

I keep telling myself I can’t lose hope, I can’t fade away into the darkness—but that girl in the mirror is about to fall.

Is this what it means to face your demons?

Only your heart is hollow enough to be a demon’s.

Aqua heard a voice—her own voice—and gasped as her reflection casually stepped out of the mirror toward her with a laugh.

Aqua darted backward and summoned her Keyblade. “That’s not true! My heart is strong! I’ll prove it!”

No one can save you. And no one wants to.

The smirking doppelgänger attacked her body with her Keyblade, and her heart with her words.

Your bonds of friendship only tie you down.

That's not true. It's thanks to Terra and Ven that I've made it this far. They keep me from giving up hope.

You'll never see the realm of light again.

I will. I know I will. After all, Terra and Ven are waiting for me. We're held together by the bond between us.

Is there any point in continuing this fight?

Yes—it's the only way forward. I have to, so I can see my friends again.

Are you really worthy of being a Keyblade Master?

My strength hasn't failed me yet. I will continue to press onward, as a Keyblade Master.

Just let go of everything and fade into the darkness.

I won't—I can't. But my heart is in so much pain; she's relentless. Which one of us is the real me? Maybe the things she's saying are true. Maybe she's the part of me already lost to the darkness. But... But still...

"I won't give up on my friends!" Aqua shouted as she struck the phantom with her Keyblade.

The reflection vanished.

Terra and Ven didn't have anything to say. But my shadow... She wanted to destroy me. I've talked to myself a lot since falling into these shadows. But with the phantom, it's as though all my doubts have gained a voice of their own.

Aqua glanced at her reflection in the mirror again, but it was apparently through moving on its own.

She's the weakness in my heart. I know I'm alone here. Have the uncountable hours in the shadows whittled away the courage I never really had?

I'm losing this fight. The darkness has found the cracks in my heart. Is this...the last apparition before it takes me over?

Aqua turned away from the mirror and began walking again. Before her was a forest of thorns, part of the world where a witch named Maleficent had cast Princess Aurora into slumber.

Had this world fallen prey to the darkness, too?

Aqua spotted people beyond the briars.

“Terra? Ven?”

Are they...phantoms...?

I don't care if they are or if I fall into the darkness. I want to see them again!

The thorny vines grew to obstruct Aqua's path and reached out to grab her, forcing her to hack them away.

She could see her two friends still some ways ahead.

Progression through the forest was a process of fending off brambles and defeating monsters.

Everything is trying so hard to keep me away from them, so why am I still seeing those visions?

I know they aren't real...but I miss them.

She chased them through the forest to a giant creature unlike anything she had ever seen. A whole crowd of them, in fact.

Aqua mustered the last of her strength and charged.

I miss them.

She thought of Ven's smiles, of Terra's determination, of Master Eraqus's warmth, of Mickey and the other friends she'd met on her journey.

I'm not alone— We're all connected.

Shoulders heaving, she tried to catch her breath once the last of the monsters was gone. There waiting for her were Terra and Ven.

Terra slowly turned around.

“Aqua, you're—”

He was speaking—she'd thought he was nothing more than a vision.

“Terra. You spoke?” she asked.

He opened his eyes. “Can you see me?”

“Of course!”

They weren't... They aren't illusions? “Terra!” Aqua rushed over to her friend.
“I can see Ven, too.”



“Ven? He’s here?” Terra looked around uncertainly.

“Terra, what’s wrong? Don’t you see him?”

“Where are we?”

“A world the darkness has consumed. It’s Enchanted Dominion,” she told him, but he still seemed confused.

Terra shook his head quietly. “Consumed? The worlds fell?”

“What’s gotten into you? How do I know that you’re Terra?”

This is still hard to believe; I can’t understand how Terra could be here. I thought I was chasing illusions, that they were the weakness in my heart playing more tricks... No, there’s something strange about this Terra. And if I’m right—

“Ven! Can you speak?” she said, but the boy’s head remained lowered.

Maybe this Terra isn’t real after all...

“Aqua, listen. I promise this is me. But I’m not myself.”

“What do you mean?” She stepped in between Terra and the silent Ven, then turned to face him.

“You’re using the name ‘Terra,’” he said. “That means you’re seeing me the way you remember me. But your heart is just painting the picture that it so wants to see. The real me is lost in shadow.”

That came as a shock— Hadn’t she sent him back to the realm of light? How could he be lost in shadow? “Then you’re here, trapped in the realm of darkness.”

“No. My heart has ties to the dark. That must be why we can talk.” Terra started to walk slowly, his eyes fixed on some point in space. “But I can’t see anything, Aqua. If you say Ven is there, then he’s like me—an illusion created by your heart.”

“I understand. Then, you and Ven are safe in the outside world?”

“I think.”

“That’s good.” Aqua placed a hand on her chest in relief. She was so worried

Terra had been trapped in this dark place, too. She had assumed all this time that she had sent him home to the realm of light along with her own Keyblade—at least her final wish had been granted. “But how did you find me?”

“I looked here,” Terra replied, pressing his hand to his chest, “and heard you in the darkness.”

Aqua had more questions: “Right, but why does your heart have ties to the darkness now? What did you mean ‘lost in shadow’?”

He lowered his eyes. “Forget about me. Aqua, Xehanort is trying to locate Ven,” he said, instead of providing answers. Why was he talking about their enemy now?

“He’ll never find him,” she replied, attempting to put his mind at ease. “I hid Ven well. I think the reason he’s not talking to me here is because he’s still there sleeping.”

A moment later, Terra’s face contorted in agony. “No, I can’t control—!” As he clutched his head, his hair turned white, and something changed in his expression.

“This place,” he said. “Is it the Chamber of Waking?”

A shudder ran through Terra’s body, blurring him until there were two of him: one looked like her friend, and the other had white hair.

“Who are you, really?” Aqua instantly moved to shield Ven.

“You don’t know? My name—” The white-haired Terra was interrupted as the other seized him from behind and cut him off.

“Aqua! Get back!”

“Terra!”

“I messed up. Xehanort is part of me. Now he’s using me so you’ll tell him where you hid Ven!”

The two Terras grappled with each other.

“Silence!”

Darkness was creeping in, tearing apart the forest.

“I won’t give in! Aqua! You have to—”

“Still you struggle!” The white-haired Terra seized hold of the real one.

Aqua had to do something. She ran toward them, but in the next instant, the shadow of another dark giant appeared in the air and snatched up Ven in one hand, then Aqua in the other.

“Aqua!” Terra shouted.

“Now you can be one with the darkness!” shouted the one with white hair, and the dark creature squeezed Aqua tight.

“Ven...” Aqua looked over at her friend, still asleep despite the danger.

“That is *enough!*” Terra roared.

Chains burst out around his body—Master Eraqus’s spells.

But the whole area was still sinking into darkness, until she could no longer see Ven, or Terra.

I’m sinking into the darkness.

Now I can be...one with it...

Aqua’s Wayfinder slipped from her palm...

Somebody, help me. Please.

...and into the hand of someone else.

“Aqua, are you okay?”

The mysterious person returned the Wayfinder to her and folded her hand over it as she sank, then gently drew her close.

“Mickey, how did—”

That kind grasp belonged to Mickey Mouse, leading her by the hand until they were on solid ground again.

“Terra! Ven!” she yelled as she came back to her senses. Unfortunately, darkness closed in again as more of those creatures she had been fighting moved in to surround them.

“No time to talk.” Mickey got his Keyblade ready.

“Dwellers of darkness...” Aqua followed his lead.

“They’re called Heartless!” said the king, and the two of them stood ready for battle.

Countless numbers of them piled together into a gigantic wave that rushed toward Aqua and Mickey—but she wasn’t alone in the fight this time.

I’ve been alone so long that I forgot how reassuring it felt to have someone else at my side. I’ll be fine, though.

“It ends now!”

Aqua cast spells, while Mickey whirled his Keyblade beside her. When she managed to bind them with a spell, she followed up with blows from her Keyblade until the swarm split apart and the creatures began to flee.

“Better not push our luck,” said Mickey as he put away his Keyblade.

Aqua nodded and let the battle end there.

“Gosh. I never thought I’d find ya in the realm of darkness, that’s for sure. So, um, what happened?”

Aqua looked down. “Have you seen Terra or Ven?” she asked.

“No, just you,” he answered.

Aqua squeezed the Wayfinder at her chest. “I’m sorry. The darkness in this place, it’s getting to me.”

“Oh. But, you’ll be okay.”

“Right,” she replied, her eyes still downcast.

“Say, we’ve been looking for ya a long time. How come you’re in this place?”

Before she answered, though, Aqua had questions of her own.

“First tell me: How long’s it been in the realm of light?”

How much time has passed since I began wandering in this dark world?

“About...ten years,” Mickey told her hesitantly.

Aqua raised her face to the sky. “Interesting.” *I had a feeling it had been a while, but...ten whole years.*

Aqua looked intently at her Wayfinder. “After we last spoke, I took Ven somewhere safe, and then I went after Terra. But Terra was about to fall to darkness, so I had one choice. I stayed here in hopes of giving him a chance.”

“I...didn’t know.”

Now it was Mickey’s turn to lower his gaze, and Aqua knelt down so she could look him in the eyes. “What about you?” she asked. “What could’ve brought you here? Has something happened in the realm of light?”

“It’s the Heartless. They’ve been attacking worlds and taking their hearts. And worlds with no hearts vanish into darkness.” Mickey finally met her eyes again.

So that was why other worlds were appearing here?

“But if we can lock the door between the two realms—light and dark—from both sides, we can protect the other worlds. So ya see, I came here to find the key on this side. Turns out, it’s not so easy getting into the realm of darkness. The points you can cross have become unstable. It’s only when a world gets consumed that an entrance appears in the realm between. So I waited for my chance to sneak in,” he explained, then placed his hand softly on the Wayfinder Aqua held. “But hey, when I got here, I felt a warm, familiar light. I followed it to find my way...to you.” Mickey smiled.

“The charm. So they were helping. Terra and Ven brought you and I back together again.” The king nodded, and Aqua turned her eyes to the Wayfinder. “But, the worlds are still in danger. Terra—did he make it back to the realm of light?”

Mickey shook his head. “We still haven’t found him.”

“I see. Well, wherever he is, he’s fighting. He’ll beat his darkness. And I know he wants me to fight, too.” She gripped the Wayfinder tightly.

“I think you’re right. He’ll be just fine.”

“Yes. But what about Ven? He won’t wake up unless I’m there with him. I have to go. I have to find a way back to the realm of light.”

I have to awaken Ven, then find Terra— Aqua stood up.

“Good. Then let’s locate that key and go home together!” Mickey smiled

reassuringly.

“Does that mean you know an exit?” Aqua asked.

Mickey scratched his head and replied, “Well, uh, I was so busy finding a way in, that I didn’t give a lot of thought to where there’d be a way out. But, together we’re sure to find one!”

Aqua burst out laughing. Now that she thought about it, Mickey had been surprisingly prone to leaping before he looked. She still remembered how he went bouncing all over the universe with that Star Shard.

“You haven’t changed at all,” she commented, fondly remembering their time together.

Mickey started laughing, too.

Ahh, when was the last time I laughed like this?

“May our hearts be our guiding key,” the king murmured, looking out ahead into the darkness.

“There’s a phrase no one has used in ages.” She knew that saying; it was one from long, long ago.

“Keyblade wielders used to say those words to each other. And now, it’s something I like to try to remember.” Aqua nodded to show she understood, and Mickey held out his hand. “So. Ready?”

She gripped it tight with renewed determination. “Ready!”

We’ll be fine as long as we’re together. We’ll get out of here and finally go home.

Aqua and Mickey set off on another dark road—a mountain trail through an unfamiliar forest. The way was full of those monsters called Heartless. But she wasn’t alone.

At long last, they arrived at a beautiful beach beneath a wide blue sky.

She knew this place.

But if it was here now, then this beach had met the same fate as the other worlds she’d encountered.

“So many worlds have been lost. And now they’re trapped here in the dark. Wait—you know this place, Aqua?” Mickey asked her.

Apparently, he wasn’t familiar with it himself.

Aqua thought of the two little boys she had met on these gorgeous sands.

“Hey, you two mind telling me your names?”

“Yes. I visited once, and I met two boys I considered passing the Keyblade on to. But because Terra had already given one of them the power, I didn’t.”

“Aqua. What were the boys’ names?”

“They were...Sora and Riku.”

Yes, she still remembered their names, and Mickey seemed to recognize them somehow, too.

“I see. We’re getting warm,” he said while taking in their surroundings. “Well, it’s Sora and Riku who’ve been helpin’ me. We’re tryin’ to get that door shut for good.”

Aqua couldn’t hide her surprise. “The same boys?”

“Aqua, if this is where my friends first got the Keyblade, it also must be where we’ll find its counterpart. The Keyblade of darkness has gotta be here on the dark side of their world.” He sounded very sure.

No sooner had he spoken than a tremor ran through the earth, signaling the return of the swarm of Heartless they had beaten earlier.

“We’ll have to hurry. C’mon!” Mickey urged, then charged forward with his Keyblade. Aqua followed his lead, and the two of them fought their way across the island against the Heartless.

So the Keyblade of darkness is on this island...?

Shadows swallowed the beach, the sea tossed violently, and dark clouds filled the sky in a storm, but Aqua and Mickey still pushed forward.

Mickey pointed at a thicket. “Let’s keep goin’,” he called, and Aqua realized there was a cave hidden behind it.

“What is this place...?” she murmured.

There were drawings on the wall of the cave, and a door in the back wall.

“I bet it’s in here.” Mickey opened the door. Darkness lay beyond it. “There!”

A gleaming golden Keyblade was floating within the murky interior.

“Is this what you’re after?” she asked as he stepped forward.

“Yep, it’s just the key I was looking for. A Keyblade from the dark realm!” The Keyblade’s glow vanished when Mickey took it in his hand. ““The Door to Darkness...tied by two keys. The Door to Darkness...to seal the light,”” he intoned, almost like a spell. “Welp, we’ve got the keys. Now we find the ones to close the door.”

“Sorry?” Aqua asked, puzzled.

“The door between the two realms—it won’t let a heart with light pass through. So only darkness keeps spilling out. We can lock the door by using the two Keyblades, but we need help on both sides to get the door shut.”

“Well, then, since you’ll be doing the locking, let me be the one to close the door.”

Aqua was willing to accept that role; of the two of them, Mickey was the one who belonged on the other side.

Mickey shook his head. “Sorry, but the job’s taken...by somebody else.”

“Huh?”

Just then, another quake shook everything around them. Light washed over them for a moment, and then the darkness returned.

She had spotted a boy in that light—a boy with silver hair.

Riku.

When they opened their eyes after the blinding flash, the world had returned to its gloomy state, except for one difference—the large white door.

“Is that the one?”

“Yep, the door to Kingdom Hearts.” Mickey looked over at it, then turned back to Aqua. “Well, it’s not the Kingdom Hearts you know. Not exactly. But even though it’s smaller, it’s still the heart of many worlds. And even if it’s not a

complete Kingdom Hearts, we definitely can't leave it open like this, or darkness will escape and destroy the remaining worlds."

Another Kingdom Hearts—the heart of many worlds. Why would such a thing be here now?

"It's time," Mickey continued. "With this key and Sora's in the realm of light, we're gonna close this door." He returned his gaze to the portal in question. "Now, all we need is Riku."

Riku and Sora... I never would have imagined those two boys I met back then were tied up in all this.

"There!" Mickey shouted, and she saw Riku running through the darkness. "That's everybody. Come on, Aqua—"

Before Mickey could finish, the mass of Heartless appeared yet again, this time making a beeline for Riku.

"Oh no!"

As Mickey sprinted after the boy, Aqua sprang into the air, held her Keyblade out toward the swarm, and unleashed chains of light. She had to stop it. "Back off!"

"Aqua!" Mickey came to a halt.

"Go without me!"

"No, I—! Aqua!"

The wave of Heartless overtook Aqua, carrying her out of the cave and back onto the white sands of the Destiny Islands. Aqua swung her Keyblade with all her might.

The battle for the realm of light...is not won. Thanks to Terra and Mickey, I know what's at stake.

I'm not afraid. I will face the long darkness.

The next time someone wanders into the realm of darkness, I'll be here.

A light to cut through all the shadows. I will be their Wayfinder.

Aqua threw herself at the Heartless.

And one day, I'll return to Terra and Ven.

"I am Master Aqua. And that's a promise," she declared, perhaps more for her own sake than anyone else's.

She slammed her Keyblade home.

"Aqua..."

Now alone, Mickey gripped his dark Keyblade tightly, then held it up to the door.

"Now, Sora! Let's close this door for good!" he called to his friend on the other side.

And as light engulfed the king...

Aqua lay on the sands of the Destiny Islands, alone.

"It's beautiful."

Dusk slowly stole across the sky, turning it to night.

"Terra, Ven..."

She remembered how they used to watch the starry sky together.

I wish the three of us could go stargazing again, and look for shooting stars.

Just me again.

But I saw Mickey, and I know that this world is connected to its counterpart.

Light began to rain upon the world, proof that the Destiny Islands were going home to the realm of light.

They did it. The worlds are being restored. Mickey closed the door.

And as this world met its end, the darkness pulled Aqua down once again.

May our hearts be our guiding key. You'll know...where I am.



Chapter 3

MYSTERIOUS TOWER

Chapter 3

Mysterious Tower

“I THOUGHT...I HEARD HER VOICE IN THE DISTANCE.”

In Yen Sid’s Mysterious Tower, King Mickey’s long tale came to an end.

Kairi looked over at Riku. His head was still lowered, even after the story was over.

“She sacrificed herself to save me?” His hands balled into fists.

He knew Mickey had been behind him when he tried to close the Door to Darkness two years ago, but he’d never heard about the other Keyblade Master.

An ache filled his chest, and he pressed the king for answers with uncharacteristic force. “Why did you keep it from me for so long?”

“I had to respect her choice,” Mickey replied quietly with a shake of his head.

“What about us? You could’ve given *us* a choice. We could have gone and helped her!”

“I know...”

Kairi was still watching them. This was the first time Riku had ever spoken so harshly to Mickey.

But Yen Sid stepped in before he could continue. “Do not be rash, Riku. As Mickey told you clearly in his story, reaching the realm of darkness the first time was not a simple task. And even if we had found a way back in, regrettably, none of us possessed the necessary means to get Aqua back out safely. So I forbade Mickey from telling you, let alone going after her.”

“Why keep it secret?” Riku asked the sorcerer, still struggling to understand.

Yen Sid’s owlsh eyes opened even wider “That much is obvious,” he replied. “If not you, then certainly Sora would have staged a reckless attempt at a

rescue.”

“But now we can help Aqua. You and I—we’re gonna go find her!” Mickey declared.

Riku’s response was equally enthusiastic. “Yeah! Count me in!”

Kairi smiled at the sight of him.

“Who’s this new Riku, and where’s the old one?”

“New me?”

Have I changed? I’m older, sure, and I cut my hair— Is there more?

“Yeah. You’re more like Sora?” Kairi observed, giggling.

“Should I be flattered?” Riku asked.

A gentle smile rose on Yen Sid’s face as he watched the exchange.

Y’know, maybe she’s right. Maybe I really am different. “I try too hard to be the role model. It’s more fun to just listen to my heart. Which is...Sora-esque.”

“Well, we still like you.”

Riku grinned back at her and nodded.

Kairi stepped toward Yen Sid. “Master, I came here because I wanted to help somehow. What can I do?”

“I have entrusted the wizard Merlin to oversee the training for our new Keyblade wielders, yourself and Lea.”

“Lea?” she asked. She didn’t know who that was.

“He means Axel,” Mickey explained, and Kairi stepped backward in surprise.

“*What?!*” she yelped.

Axel was the one who had kidnapped her while he was a member of Organization XIII.

But Riku had encountered Axel several times during his journeys, and he believed something had changed about him as well.

“He’s a regular person now. He even saved Sora for us. You can trust him!”

Mickey informed her.

Kairi turned to Riku questioningly, and he nodded back at her.

“C’mon, Riku. It’s time for us to go. First, we gotta find an entrance to the realm of darkness.”

The king walked toward the door to the chamber, eager to depart, while Riku and Kairi started after him.

Yen Sid wasn’t quite finished, though. “Mickey, take these along with you. The three good fairies asked that you be presented with them. They are new vestments that will shield the both of you from the darkness.”

The sorcerer held his hand over his desk, and two rectangular cases appeared in a burst of light. There was a small brown one for Mickey and a blue one for Riku. The two took their bags and thanked the master, then looked at each other and nodded.

“Okay, let’s go!” Mickey said with fire.

And that was how the two of them ended up in the Dark World.

Riku and Mickey were wearing the new outfits they had received from Yen Sid. Their pants had matching checkers at the cuffs, but Mickey’s pants were red where Riku’s were blue. Their jackets also had a similar design, complete with hoods for concealing their faces.

Riku kept a cautious eye on their surroundings as he walked slowly forward. He had been down here two times in the past: once when he closed the Door to Darkness, and then again when he found himself here with Sora.

“Do you need a break? We can stop,” Mickey asked, turning to Riku when he noticed his comrade lagging behind.

“No, just... I’ve been here. I should know this place. But that all seems like another life.”

Not much time had actually passed since his last visit, but still.

“Well, gee,” Mickey said, walking over to Riku. “Think of all the things you’ve seen! All the feelings you’ve felt. Why, you’ve done years of growin’ in almost no time at all.”

“I remember my first time here. I was so scared. But now, my doubts and fears are gone. If anything, I feel exhilarated. And it’s not because there’s darkness in me—I know too well what that rush is like. This is different.” Riku placed a hand on his chest and closed his eyes for a moment.

He remembered the boy he had been when the darkness had nearly taken his heart. *Light and darkness will always be two sides of the same coin, so all that matters is to keep myself from swaying toward the shadow again. Darkness exists in everything, but it won’t tell my heart what to do.*

“And it’s not adrenaline, either,” he continued. “I know Aqua needs us...but I’m ready. I’m in control now. Maybe it’s because you’re with me this time.”

He finished his little speech with a smile.

Mickey returned the smile and shook his head. “It’s not me. I think it’s because you’ve finally found inside you that special strength to protect what matters.”

“What?”

Mickey’s observation caught Riku by surprise.

“Sometimes you care so much for somebody that other feelings disappear. And then, there’s no room for fear or doubt.”

Riku looked down at his right hand as a faint memory from his childhood suddenly came back to him.

“Strength for what?”

“To protect the things that matter. You know, like my friends.”

Who was that guy back then? That was the day I first held a Keyblade...

“Is that it? ‘Strength to protect what matters’? It reminds me of a promise I made.”

“To who?”

“Just someone I once met. Can’t tell.”

Riku curled his hand into a fist. *That was our secret promise— I remember he said the magic would wear off if I told anyone.*

“Sounds like a good memory.”

“Yeah...”

Maybe, just maybe, that promise still bound them together to this day...

“While we’re reminiscing...,” Riku said. “Mickey, does any of this look familiar?”

“Sort of, but the realm of darkness has changed since I was here with Aqua.” Mickey’s head swiveled back and forth.

“Yeah, it’s different from what I remember,” Riku agreed. He didn’t remember any of this from his first and second visits. The realm of darkness was huge, though, and any new worlds it had taken could have changed its appearance.

“Usually, I’d just follow my heart, and Aqua would show me the way.” Mickey started walking. There was a serious look in his eyes as he gazed off into the distance. “But the closer I get, the hazier our connection feels.”

What would be causing that?

“Either way, we can’t give up hope,” Mickey reminded him, turning around.

Riku gave him a nod. “Yeah,” he said, following him.

It was easy to let your mind wander in the constant murk of this world, and the two of them continued in silence. After seeing the same unchanging view for so long, you might start to think it would never end.

If Aqua’s been lost in here all by herself this whole time, I can imagine how alone she must feel. Even a Heartless would be a welcome sight.

The sheer loneliness of this place was crushing. But Riku had Mickey with him.

Suddenly the landscape opened up, and the sound of waves reached their ears.

It was a beach in the dusky gloom. A hazy light hung over the water in the distance. Perhaps it was a setting sun; perhaps a moon.

“This beach...,” Riku murmured in spite of himself. He had been here before.

“It’s gone,” Mickey whispered, and Riku looked at him curiously.

“Huh?”

“I was positive Aqua was here. But now...her trail’s gone dim.”

“I’ve been here, too. With Sora,” Riku told him. They had arrived here together after defeating Xemnas.

“Really?”

“This is where we found our way back to the realm of light. Hey, maybe Aqua did, too!”

Hope began rising in his chest. *Back then, Sora and I sat here and talked through some things—really important things—and then that letter took us back to the realm of light. Maybe something similar happened to Aqua—*

However, Mickey shook his head sadly. “Aqua...has fallen into an even darker abyss—somewhere I can’t see her. And I don’t think we’re equipped to dive any deeper than we are,” he said, gazing out over the water.

“So then...” Riku sighed, just as a pack of Heartless sprouted up from the ground.

“Oh no!”

“What?!”

The pair summoned their Keyblades, but they were already surrounded.

“Riku...be careful. Even the least threatening Heartless are stronger in this realm.”

“I got it.”

Riku tightened his grip on his Keyblade at Mickey’s warning. The Heartless swarmed together in a gigantic black tornado, then went on the attack.

Riku sprang right into the middle of the mass of creatures and started fighting them off with his Keyblade. Meanwhile, Mickey used magic to break the horde apart.

“It’s not over. Be careful!”

“Oh no!”

Just as Riku landed on the ground, a wave of Shadows crashed down on him from behind and completely swallowed him up.

“Riku!”

He was floating in dark water—an abyss of perfect blackness. He couldn’t breathe.

Is the darkness going to—? No, that’s not possible.

Didn’t expect to see you again.

There was a voice.

“What...?”

Riku opened his eyes in the water. He couldn’t see who was speaking. *This voice—is it...mine? Why am I hearing my own voice?*

Why did you even come here?

“Because someone needs me,” Riku answered. He could sense whoever was there with him wavering slightly.

Do you want some help?

“Who are you?” Riku asked.

Me? I’m...

Riku ran out of air before he could hear the rest of the reply. *You’re— Yeah, it must be you.*

“Riku... Wake up... Riku!”

His eyes opened gradually as Mickey called to him, and he saw the king looking at him with worry. Riku sat up.

“Are you okay?”

“Where’d the Heartless go?”

“I got more than half of ’em, and the rest vanished. But they spit you out first,” said Mickey.

“Thanks. I owe ya.” Riku pressed down on his temple. His head still hurt a bit. *That voice... That was...him. The one I met back in Castle Oblivion.*

“I know ya feel invincible, but we’re not,” Mickey admonished him, bringing him all the way back to reality.

“Are *you* all right, Mickey?” Riku asked.

“Yeah, thanks to the new gear. But...your Keyblade...”

The king was looking at the weapon in Riku’s hand. The tip of Way to the Dawn—the Keyblade he had used all this time—had snapped off.

“The Heartless here are stronger than what we expected. I guess we should have powered up our Keyblades before we came in here, huh? I think we need to go back to Master Yen Sid’s tower so we can regroup.”

Riku examined the broken key. “But Aqua’s still down there, alone. Facing enemies like that.”

“I know...”

Riku slowly approached the edge of the water. “What if she’s feeling as scared and alone as I felt the first time I came here? How long are we supposed to keep her waiting in this awful place?” he said, staring out across the sea.

Mickey walked up alongside him. “But Aqua... She’s like Sora.”

“*What?!*” Riku exclaimed. Of all the things he was expecting to hear, it wasn’t that. *You’re telling me the master who saved me back then has her head in the clouds like him...?*

Mickey hurriedly added, “No, no, no... *Strong* like Sora!”

“Okay... Good. Then I guess she’s gonna be all right. Sora could fall into any darkness and swim his way out.” Riku returned his gaze to the horizon beyond the sea.

“Besides, we won’t be long.”

“Right,” Riku agreed firmly, then planted the broken Way to the Dawn in the sand. “Can’t use this Keyblade anymore. Might as well leave it here...for the other me.”

“Wha...?”

Mickey glanced up at Riku curiously.

Yeah, for the other me—the one who’s wandering down here alone.

Riku and Mickey put the sea behind them and made their way back to the realm of light.

And now we return for a third time to the Mysterious Tower, where Sora and his friends had arrived after their visit to Hercules.

“I see... You could not regain your strength,” Yen Sid mused gravely, but Sora and his smile were unfazed.

“Aw, no biggie. I still learned a lot.” *I learned about protecting what matters—the people you love most.*

Donald and Goofy were also smiling next to him.

“Regardless, Sora, you will need the power of waking.”

“Oh... Hmm...” Sora paused to think.

“Your strength can’t be gone forever,” Goofy said, trying to encourage him. “Maybe something’ll trigger it real soon.”

“Like what, exactly?” Sora said in frustration. Goofy’s boundless optimism wasn’t really helping.

“I know!” Donald chimed in. “How about a bonk on the head?”

Sora glared at him, and Donald glared right back.

“Perhaps it could be something that is as simple as that,” Yen Sid murmured.

“Wait, *you* think so, too?”

“Whenever you are in need, magic happens. That is your greatest strength, Sora.”

“You make it sound like an accident,” Sora said, deflated. Yen Sid’s assessment was taking the wind out of his sails, and Donald and Goofy kept laughing at him.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

“We’re back, Master!”

Riku and Mickey entered the chamber.

“Oh, wow. You guys are all here!”

“We were here before, but you guys didn’t wait.”

The argument was quickly forgotten, and Sora, Donald, Goofy, the king, and Riku were simply happy to see one another again. Sora and his companions filled in the other two on the results of their mission, and when they were finished, Mickey replied, “But honestly...we didn’t fare any better.”

Donald and Goofy shared a look. “Did ya manage to find out where Aqua is?” Goofy asked. “‘Cause Master Yen Sid said that’s why you fellas left.”

“Not even a hint?” added Donald.

Riku and Mickey shared a look of chagrin, and the king nodded sadly.

Riku began to elaborate. “We know Master Aqua made it as far as the beach that Sora and I once visited, but that’s where her trail ends.”

Apparently, the situation was more dire than they had realized.

“All traces of her vanish into the great abyss...beneath the realm of darkness,” Mickey added.

“She’s gone?” Donald asked weakly.

“No. Sora was dragged into the abyss during his exam. And I went in after him. So, I think if we find someone that was really close to Aqua, and they make the dive, they could reach her down there.” Riku clearly believed there was some way to save her, but Mickey only shook his head.

“I’m not sure who’s even left to ask. Ventus is hidden...and Aqua is the only one who knows where. Plus, nobody’s seen Terra in ages. Aqua was the last.”

As long as they were unable to locate Ven and Terra, Aqua would never return to the realm of light. And unfortunately, they had no means of tracking down either of them.

“So Aqua— She’s gonna be the key to finding all three.” Riku fell into thought.

“Yes,” said Yen Sid. “Their teacher, Master Eraqus, would have been another possibility, had Xehanort not mercilessly struck him down.”

The sorcerer’s gaze lowered just the barest amount—a rarity for him.

Sora was the one who broke the silence. “I’ll save her.” Everyone in the room turned to him, surprised by his forcefulness. But he couldn’t help speaking up—the feeling had welled up so suddenly, squeezing his heart tight.

I will save Aqua.

“You can’t!”

“But, Sora, that’s gonna be super hard, since you don’t have the power of waking.”

Donald sounded a bit annoyed, and Goofy merely worried.

“Huh? Sorry... I have no idea why that just popped out.” Sora scratched his head, also confused by the sudden surge of emotion.

“Well, it was pretty convincing.”

“Yeah, better not let us down.”

Mickey and Riku smiled.

“Okay,” Sora affirmed with a grin of his own.

“Sora,” Yen Sid said, “you must focus on regaining your lost power of waking. Mickey and Riku, I recall that Master Aqua journeyed to many worlds and connected with others who could be the link we need.”

“Good plan, sir. Riku and I will retrace her steps and see if we can find any clues, but first...” Mickey stepped before the sorcerer, and Riku did the same. “We got hit pretty hard in the realm of darkness. My Keyblade was damaged, and the Heartless broke Riku’s clean in half. So, we’re gonna need replacements before we can continue.”

“In that case, rendezvous with Kairi and Lea. They are continuing their training under the tutelage of the wizard Merlin.”

Riku and Mickey bowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Also, I would like you to deliver these for me.” Yen Sid waved his hand, and two cases appeared on his desk, one red and one black. They were of a different size and color from the ones the sorcerer had given Riku and Mickey for their journey to the realm of darkness.

“They are the same as the ones I gave you. Special vestments to shield Kairi and Lea from the darkness.”

“We got ‘em.”

Riku and Mickey each took a bag.

“What? No fair! What about my outfit, Master?” Sora cut in.

Donald was quick to admonish him. “Sora, don’t bug him like that. It’s inconsiderate.”

However, the sorcerer was merely amused. “Settle down. I have new clothes for you, too, Sora. A gift from the good fairies.”

Yen Sid held out his hand, and one more suitcase appeared on the desk.

Sora beamed. “I knew you’d come through for me. Thanks!”

Donald seemed disappointed that he and Goofy didn’t get cool new clothes, too.

“These are no ordinary garments, Sora. Like before, they have very special powers, so it took extra time to prepare them. In addition, there is a special gift from Chip and Dale inside.”

“Cool. Okay!” Sora replied gleefully, shifting the big bag from his shoulder to his back.

“Now, you are all ready to proceed,” the sorcerer announced just as a diminutive figure hopped onto his desk.

“Hey, wait! Don’t forget about me!”

“Jiminy!” Sora and his friends exclaimed.

The dapper cricket had been their constant companion on all their previous journeys. As always, he had his top hat and umbrella.

“Every journey worth goin’ on needs a cricket to keep track of it. And I can’t let ya start this one without ol’ Jiminy Cricket by your side.” Jiminy swept off his hat and bowed.

“Good. Now, to mark the beginning of a new journey, I wish for you to have this, Sora.”

With another wave of Yen Sid's hand, a bangle set with a purple stone appeared in Sora's hand. It was engraved with the symbol for Spirits—residents of the Sleeping Worlds who ate nightmares.

"Okay?"

"That is a Heartbinder. Think of it as a good luck charm made just for you. You have a gift, Sora, for connecting with others, and this makes that gift stronger."

Sora clutched the Heartbinder tightly and nodded.

"It's time to go!" Mickey cried, and everyone stood at attention and bowed.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy strained their ears to hear something.

Goofy was right—Yen Sid was definitely whispering a certain phrase:

"May your hearts be your guiding keys."

"See?"

They all shared a look and smiled.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were in the Gummi Ship. Sora was wearing his new outfit from Yen Sid, a mostly black and red jacket and pants with checkers on the lapels.

"Okay, where to?" Donald asked, but Sora still had his arms crossed behind his head in thought.

"Oh, come on. Would you get serious?"

"Gimme a break, okay? I told you. These things take time."

"Gawrsh, is it just me, or is this becoming a routine?" Goofy remarked, watching the scene play out again.

Just then, an unfamiliar melody began playing from somewhere.

"Huh? What?"

Everyone searched around them for the source of the sound, until Jiminy hopped onto Sora's shoulder and pointed at his pocket.

"It's comin' from you, Sora!" he said.

Sora shoved his hand into the pocket and found a square, palm-sized device

with a screen. Near the bottom was a button with Mickey's symbol on it.

"Can you make it stop?"

"I don't know how. Maybe...this."

Sora touched the green button on the screen, and a very familiar chipmunk appeared. "Hooray! He picked up," Dale cried.

"Huh? Dale?"

"Hey, Chipper, I finally got him! Hurry up, Chip!" Dale shouted, and the other chipmunk leaped into the image.

"Well! It's about time," Chip said.

The two chipmunks appeared to be calling from the study of Disney Castle, and they explained in turns. "Ya gotta answer the phone, Sora, or we can't give ya updates. We got lots and lots of important stuff we want to tell ya!"

"That's why we asked Master Yen Sid to make sure you got this Gummiphone we made ya. So we'd be able to stay in touch with you at all times."

"And it takes pictures."

So this gadget was called a Gummiphone?

"Oh! You finally finished it," Jiminy chimed in cheerfully. "Say, with this Gummiphone, we can talk to each other across worlds. In fact, I might even try writing my journal on it."

"Wow! Sounds like it's pretty handy, guys."

Sora inspected the Gummiphone closely.

"So, what's so important?"

"This! Back when you and Riku quested through the Sleeping Worlds, Riku recovered some secret research data that Ansem the Wise hid inside you—"

"Ansem's Code!" Dale cried out in the middle of Chip's reply.

Ansem's Code—the fruits of Ansem the Wise's research, entrusted to Riku when he overcame Sora's nightmare during the Mark of Mastery exam.

"Mm-hmm," added Chip. "We've been workin' our tails off tryin' to crack it

and see what it says.” A second later, the screen switched over to a young man with silver hair and blue eyes wearing a white coat with a purple ascot tie. His long bangs obscured one side of his face.

“The data has been encrypted, so we’ve only deciphered some of it.”

“Huh?” *He seems familiar somehow, but...*

“Oh... I guess we haven’t spoken since the castle. I’m lenzo. Aelean is here, too.”



A well-built man passed behind him for a moment.

“Aeleus, whatever’s between you and Roxas, it’s in the past,” lenzo called over his shoulder, laughing. “Sora, the reason we’re here is because you and your friends defeated our Nobodies, thereby ‘recompleting’ us. We cast off our hearts by choice, make no mistake, but we didn’t know that Xemnas—or rather, Xehanort—was deceiving us,” lenzo explained softly.

“Huh? Xemnas?”

As Sora tried to figure out what Xemnas would have to do with this, Goofy shouted, “Aw, he’s with them!”

lenzo’s name while he was a Nobody in Organization XIII was Zexion. His Nobody was destroyed in Castle Oblivion, which enabled him to later revive as a human. Ansem the Wise had also cared for him as a child.

“Not anymore. Xemnas and Xehanort have no hold over us now. We’re students of the heart, exactly the same as we were before all of this began,” lenzo told them in a calm voice, trying to dispel everyone’s fears.

Donald’s trust wasn’t so easily won. “Yeah, right.”

“But ya know, now that I think about it, Axel’s on our side now,” Goofy reminded him.

Donald mulled over that. True, Axel *had* become their ally.

“We have friends we want to bring back to this world, just the same as you,” said lenzo. “To do that, we have to work together.”

Thinking about it more, it did seem worth giving lenzo the benefit of the doubt. But what had happened to the other members of Organization XIII?

“In that spirit, Sora...,” lenzo continued, “we found some intriguing data in the bit of code we deciphered.”

“Is it about me?”

“Yes. In order to piece your memories back together, our teacher, Ansem the Wise, took a close look at your heart. And what he found...is that your heart doesn’t belong just to you.”

Everyone was shocked by this revelation—everyone except Sora, rather.

“Gawrsh, you don’t seem surprised.”

“Yeah.” Sora nodded at Goofy, then softly placed a hand on his own chest. “Honestly, I suspected as much. There’s another heart inside mine. I think it’s Roxas’s. Just like Naminé’s is still inside Kairi’s.”

“Interesting... Well, no one knows your heart better than you,” lenzo acknowledged, then continued: “To be honest, we still have a plethora of questions on our side, but...the idea has merit. It’s incredible enough that you and your Nobody are able to coexist. If you share a heart...no wonder someone as remarkable as you caught Ansem the Wise’s eye. We’ll keep investigating based on your hypothesis. I’ll be in touch.”

The screen switched back from lenzo to Chip and Dale.

“Okeydokey, we’ll give you fellas a ring if there’s anything else. Remember, me and Chip, the guys at Radiant Garden, and King Mickey and everybody are never far away,” Dale said, and then the screen of the Gummiphone went blank.

“I have to find Roxas and save him,” Sora whispered to himself, staring at his phone. He raised his head to face whatever was coming next. “The others are following Aqua’s heart, so I’ll follow Roxas’s heart!”

Donald and the others nodded enthusiastically at the idea.

“Trust the guidance that your heart gives ya, Sora. That’s what Master Yen Sid said,” Goofy agreed with a smile.

“Where to?” asked Donald.

In answer, Sora summoned his Keyblade and pointed it at the Ocean Between. “Oh, that’s easy.”

After the call was over, lenzo drew a deep breath and smiled. Sora was always good at that.

He was in the laboratory of Radiant Garden where he had awoken alongside Lea, Aeolus, Even, and Dilan—or, as they had been known during their time in Organization XIII, Axel, Lexaeus, Vexen, and Xaldin.

When a stolen heart returned, the person to whom it belonged would revive where they had first lost it. Five people had awakened here—but more than five had been lost in this lab. Isa—Saïx—was unaccounted for.

Lea had headed out straightaway, and Even, who had taken longer to awaken, had also vanished at some point.

lenzo wasn't sure what either of them intended to do; all he knew was that he wanted to carry on the mission of his teacher, Ansem the Wise. Aelean and Dilan were still here, but they weren't apprentices. Even was, and as a researcher, he was a man worthy of great respect.

To lenzo, he was also like a father, as much as Ansem the Wise had been.

He let out a sigh and walked out of the lab.

INTERMISSION: 7 DAYS

THE SUN WAS SETTING OVER A HILLOCK DEEP WITHIN a forest in this special world. Here, Lea—or Axel—and Kairi were training as Keyblade wielders.

Axel had arrived first, and Kairi not long after.

She had been a bit frightened to see him again, but this wasn't the first time the two of them had been alone together.

Axel had been the one who kidnapped her back then. You could call it whatever you liked—kidnapping or just bringing her with him—but it didn't make a difference in the end.

Horrible things had happened to her because of him. At least, that's how Axel saw it.

"How many days has it been since you got here?" he asked Kairi, squinting his eyes as he watched the sunset. Their training had only just begun.

"Why do you keep asking, Lea? You've said that every day."

"Oh, sorry."

"And you keep apologizing, too."

"It's just...I feel like there's something I need to remember."

"Master Merlin said time doesn't really exist here. Still, maybe it's a good idea to keep track of the days. Today would be the seventh. But you got here before me, so—"

"Nah, we can start counting from when you got here."

"Huh?"

"Maybe," Axel said, then closed his eyes and tried to clear the fog from his mind.

Kairi joined him, watching the sunset.

How many days has it been now since you got here? Oh man, I could sure use

some sea-salt ice cream.



Chapter 4

T W I L I G H T T O W N

Chapter 4

Twilight Town

IN THE DISTANCE, THE TWO BELLS ON THE FAMOUS station clocktower were ringing to let the townsfolk know the exact time. This was Twilight Town, the place where Sora had once awoken from a long sleep, where Roxas's long sleep had begun—and where a trio in black coats had eaten some sea-salt ice cream.

Sora and his friends walked down the hill from the station to the plaza.

“Gawrsh, we forgot to fill Master Yen Sid in on what happened. Should we go back?” Goofy folded his arms.

“Typical Sora,” complained Donald, while Sora crossed his own arms in thought.

“Hmm...” His two friends were referring to the run-in with Maleficent and Xigbar in Olympus. “No, the others have already got enough on their plates as it is. Why go stressing them out? The three of us know how to handle a couple of old adversaries, right?”

“Yeah, I guess...,” Donald agreed as they walked down the avenue, bathed in the light of the setting sun.

Goofy wasn't convinced. “But doesn't that thing Pete said bother ya?”

“The black box?” asked Donald. Maleficent and Pete had been searching for something.

“Come on, we're talking about Pete. That means it's probably no big deal.”

“I don't know...” Goofy didn't seem ready to let the matter go, but then a tram whizzed by just as they reached the bottom of the hill.

“Oh, cool! The trams are still here.”

Sora took off running after it, much to Donald's displeasure.

“Sora, it hasn't been *that* long.”

“Feels like it,” Sora said uncertainly. To him, it really did feel like long ago. Long, long ago—and yet not long ago at all.

Then Goofy said, “Maybe you’re feelin’ what Roxas feels because he misses home.”

Oh yeah. This feeling might belong to the Roxas in my heart.

“Actually, I ran into Roxas in the Sleeping Worlds,” Sora replied.

“But it really has to be you.”

He remembered what Roxas had said to him.

“It was like...seeing into his heart for the first time.”

Sora had felt so many emotions from the Roxas in his heart—so much regret.

Donald and Goofy had some memories of him, themselves.

“And he was in the datascape, too.”

“Uh-huh. It was a test to see if your data version was ready to face the hurt that you carry inside.”

“Was I ready? I do know hurt,” Sora asked as he slowly opened his hands and stared at his palms. “When I lost Riku and Kairi, and later when I lost the Keyblade, and you guys had to go on without me like that... Having no one to turn to was the worst kind of hurt. But that just shows how much you mean to me. Carrying around a little hurt can’t be all that bad. Hurting is part of caring.”

Sora gazed at his two friends, while Donald and Goofy shared a look.

“He sounds like Data-Sora.”

“Of course. Any Sora’s still Sora.”

The two of them smiled.

“So wait... If Roxas feels something, then we’re in the right place. Roxas, I’m gonna find you!” Sora exclaimed, renewing his promise.

But then...

Do you seek our liege?

Sora heard a strange voice, and he gasped and spun around.

“Nobodies!”

He got his Keyblade ready to fight the white creatures weaving toward him, and the battle that followed was quick.

Was that voice...really a voice at all? It was more like someone talking to me in my mind.

“Sora! This is no time for daydreaming!” Donald quacked angrily as he fired off spells.

“Sorry!”

“Be careful, Sora.”

Goofy knocked Nobodies away with his shield. Sora nodded, then ran over to the last one and struck it with his Keyblade.

It’s still bothering me, though... “Hmm... What was that voice? I know I heard it.” The fight may have been over, but Sora was still puzzled.

Donald and Goofy glanced at each other.

“I didn’t hear it.”

“You sure it wasn’t the wind? Or somethin’ else?”

Sora lapsed into thought. “I’m pretty sure...”

Suddenly, they heard more voices, and these were definitely real.

“Where’d they come from?!”

“Get the ice cream later!”

“What? Hold up!”

Sora raised his head— He knew these guys! “See? Voices!” he said while his two friends just looked at him with concern. He quickly realized these voices weren’t the same, though, and turned around. “...New ones?”

Hayner, Pence, and Olette were running toward them with a pack of Heartless hot on their heels.

“Heeey! Sora! Hello, good-bye,” Hayner shouted as he and the other two ran past the trio.

Sora planted himself in the path of the Heartless and yelled back, “Go! We got this.”

Donald and Goofy prepared for battle, too. Nobodies, and now Heartless?

The horde of Shadows congealed into a black current that hurled itself at the three of them. Sora blocked the attack with his Keyblade, but the force almost knocked him over. The Heartless used this opportunity to turn sharply in another direction, but Donald had a spell waiting for them. When the swarm was stunned, Sora and Goofy charged in and scattered it. After a few rounds of this, the Heartless were dealt with for good.

“Nice fightin’! Thanks, Sora,” said Hayner. His two friends were with him, too.

“Hayner, Pence, Olette,” Sora called. “It’s been ages!”

“What? It hasn’t been *that* long.” Hayner shrugged.

Donald looked up at Sora. “Ya see?”

Really? It really feels like it’s been forever, though, thought Sora.

“Donald! Goofy! How are ya?” Olette said with a smile.

“We’re good,” Donald replied

“Howdy there, Olette.”

Pence jumped in the mix with excitement. “So does this mean weird stuff’s going down again?”

“You kidding, Pence? When have we ever seen a tornado of shadowy blobs before? It’s not *weird*. This is *unprecedented!*” Hayner claimed, also worked up.

“Hmm, I guess it is. The creatures from the last time were bright white. These things must be new. Man, I can’t wait to get to sleuthin’.” Pence’s interest was definitely piqued.

The “shadowy blobs” were probably the Heartless, while the “bright white” things would be the Nobodies.

“We’re already done with the school project, silly,” Olette chided, then turned to look at Sora and his friends. “Whatever’s going on, you wouldn’t be here

without a good reason. Which is?”

“Well, actually, we’re looking for Roxas,” Sora replied.

“Roxas?” Olette repeated.

Hayner paused to think for a moment. “That’s funny... I don’t know any Roxas, but the name sounds familiar.”

“Maybe we bumped into him somewhere,” Pence offered.

“Uh...that’s one way to put it.”

As Donald considered how to fill them in, Goofy began rummaging in his pocket and pulled out a photo. “Actually, he mighta been friends with another version of ya.” He held it out to them, showing Hayner, Pence, Olette, and Roxas in front of a haunted mansion.

“This photograph...,” Olette whispered.

“Yeah,” Pence added. “We’ve got the same one.”

The photo he pulled out was identical—except for the fact that Roxas wasn’t in it.

That was enough for Hayner to put two and two together. “Oh yeah! The other Twilight Town!”

Hayner and his friends had helped Sora and Mickey get to another version of Twilight Town using the computer in the old mansion—a datascape where Roxas could be put to sleep.

Pence had hit upon the same idea. “It’s like one of those ‘spot the difference’ puzzles...except really easy. I guess in that town, we’re friends with this ‘Roxas’ person.”

“Sora, let us help you track Roxas down,” Hayner offered while Pence and Olette nodded in agreement. “He seems like a pretty cool guy,” he added with a grin, looking at the photo.

“Yeah. He is,” Sora agreed happily.

“Great. Then let’s all go ask around town. If alternate-us knew Roxas, then maybe alternate-other folks did, too,” Pence suggested to Hayner and Olette.

“Mm-hmm. Sora, you three should go to that place in the photo. It’s the old mansion. The three of us’ll cover places in town,” Olette said.

“Thanks,” Sora replied with a smile. “Oh yeah!” Remembering something else, he dug around in his pocket. “I got this phone thingy that takes pictures. Want to snap a photo while we’re all here?”

Sora pulled out the Gummiphone.

Goofy took the picture, which was ultimately a somewhat silly one of Sora, Hayner, Pence, and Olette with a very grumpy Donald in the middle. Sora still thought that it would make a nice way to remember their visit, though.

“Okay, we’d better start asking around,” said Hayner. “You start by checking out the old mansion. We’ll catch up.”

“Got it,” Sora answered. With that, the trio set off for the mansion.



The old mansion lay beyond an underground conduit found on the outskirts of town—and there were Heartless everywhere. Sora and his friends fought their way through, then stepped out into the woods.

“Things are a bit different than last time.”

“Really?”

Sora had awoken in this town, but even setting out on his journey afterward, he’d been filled with nostalgia. A while later, he had come back to find the other Twilight Town with the help of Hayner, Pence, and Olette.

Everything about the place reminded Sora of Roxas.

It’s all so familiar—and I don’t think it’s just because Roxas was in the other Twilight Town. I think he was in this version, too. Maybe.

“Huh?”

Goofy stopped in front of a bunch of fruit scattered on the ground and picked up one of the pieces.

“What’s that?” Sora grabbed one, too.

“Ack!”

“Heartless!”

Goofy brought his shield into position, but the creatures scurried back to the trees. They were chasing someone else.

“What do you think they’re up to?”

A closer look revealed that the Heartless had trapped a small gray rat.

“Oh no!”

“Let’s help!”

“Yeah!”

The trio went after the Heartless, weapons at the ready. These little guys were extremely agile in the trees, which made them a real headache—but they were still no match for the heroes.

Once the Heartless were gone, the rat came scampering down from his perch

and bowed.

“Well, take care,” Sora said, and he had just begun to walk away when his body started acting of its own accord.

“Wh-what is—”

“Are you okay?” Donald watched him curiously.

Goofy noticed the rat from earlier was on top of Sora, pulling his hair. “Lookie! That little feller’s parked on your head.”

“Huuuh?”

The rodent yanked Sora’s hair again to make him scoop up a piece of fruit.

“Ya know, he probably wants you to pick up the fruit for him,” said Goofy, and the rat nodded from his perch on Sora’s head.

“Okay, that’s fine,” Sora grumbled. “But I can do it by myself.” The rat finally scurried off him.

There were oranges, apples, and plenty of other tasty-smelling fruit there. Once Sora, Donald, and Goofy had gathered it all, the rat bobbed his head happily.

“So, what’re you gonna do with all this anyway?” Sora asked.

The rat started pantomiming something with his paws, but Sora couldn’t make heads or tails of what it meant. Donald and Goofy shared a puzzled look, too.

The little guy seemed disappointed that they didn’t understand.

“Well, okay. You be careful going home,” Sora said, then went on his way. Now they could finally head for the old mansion.

“Bye-bye!”

“See ya ’round!”

The rat watched them go, then turned back to his mound of fruit.

Meanwhile, Sora, Donald, and Goofy had finally arrived at the mansion. The gate wasn’t locked.

As he looked up, Sora thought he saw one of the curtains move.

Who is it? Who's up there in that room? I can't remember.

"Whaddaya think, guys? This place is even creepier than I remember," he commented.

Goofy agreed. "Well, they do say that this mansion is haunted."

Just then, a hand clapped down on Sora's shoulder.

"Hey there!"

"Ahh!"

"Wak!"

"Yaaa-hoo-hoo-hooey!"

Sora, Donald, and Goofy all screamed in unison.

The hand belonged to Hayner, as it turned out.

"Thanks for the heart attack!" Sora shouted.

"Oh, what? Did I scare you?" Hayner teased.

Donald bristled at the very idea. "Not a chance!"

Once Olette had smoothed things over a bit, Sora and his friends asked how Hayner's investigation had gone. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to find anyone who knew Roxas. The old mansion was the only lead they had left, so here they were.

"You guys ready?" Olette asked.

"Another Twilight Town awaits!" Pence declared.

Sora looked up at the mansion and nodded.

Inside, the place was as dusty as ever. They went up the steps and to the right to the room at the end of the hall. Sure enough, the steps to the underground computer room were still there.

Pence dashed over to the computer and sat down in front of it. As usual, nothing on the monitor made any sense whatsoever to Sora, but he could at least tell the thing worked. Pence had been in charge of all the techy stuff last

time anyway.

“The password was...uh, ‘sea-salt ice cream,’ right?” Pence muttered to himself as he entered the code. “Okay, I’m in. Let’s get the transporter working...”

Fortune wasn’t on their side, however, as the text on the monitor flashed red and an error alert sounded. Pence tried several times with no luck.

“Oh man. The transporter’s been protected.”

“Protected from what?” Sora looked at Pence’s hands.

“I guess from us? We can’t use it to get to the other Twilight Town?”

“Why not? It worked before! We sent Sora there!” Hayner pressed.

“And there’s no other way?” Olette asked dejectedly.

What if we never find a way to get to Roxas? Sora looked up sadly at the indecipherable text displayed on the monitor.

Suddenly, the Gummiphone in his pocket started ringing with an incoming call. He punched the green button again, and there was lenzo.

“Hello, Sora,” said lenzo. “You wouldn’t happen to be in front of a computer?”

“Huh? Well...yeah. But, how’d you know that?” he asked.

“I was tinkering with Ansem’s computer—you know, to decrypt the code that was left in it? And I noticed that someone had logged in from another terminal. I figured it might be you.”

“Oh! Yeah, the log terminal.” Sora figured it was better to just say yes to whatever lenzo was saying.

“You don’t know what he said,” Donald cut in.

Sora leaned in close to him. “Oh, and what, you do?” he shot back.

“I know / haven’t got a clue,” Goofy joked amiably from off to one side.

lenzo realized this was going nowhere and chuckled. “Then, uhhh...who was it that logged in?” he asked.

“Oh, hi there. This is Pence,” Pence called as Sora turned the Gummiphone

toward him. "I'm the one who logged into the computer."

"Good. As long as it's a user that we know we can trust."

lenzo sounded relieved to finally have a grasp on the situation, especially since Sora and his usual crew weren't exactly up to the task.

"Yup. But, I'm kind of stuck here. One of the programs is protected, so...I can't run it."

"Which program?"

Hayner jumped into the conversation. "The transporter to the other Twilight Town! It's the only way to find Roxas. You gotta help us."

"Another Twilight Town? And a 'transporter'? Okay... A virtual town inside the computer, made of data."

Jiminy hurriedly poked his head over Sora's shoulder. "A datascape!" he exclaimed. "Fellas..."

"Mm-hmm, we've seen one. That's what we used once to investigate Jiminy's journal," Goofy replied with a nod.

While Sora hadn't actually gone into the datascape, he had been told about the other version of himself and his adventure with Donald and Goofy.

"Maybe I can do something. Pence, let's get a network set up. My address here is..."

Pence started typing as lenzo gave instructions through the Gummiphone. Sora's eyes glazed over as he watched him do...whatever it was he was doing.

"Okay, sharing is enabled."

The words snapped him to attention just as boredom was seriously setting in.

"Huh? Were you able to fix it?"

"Now that our two computers have been successfully networked together, I can take control of the terminal there and change the privileges..."

But Sora only had one thing at the forefront of his mind. "And Roxas?"

"Yes. For the virtual world to be completely realized, Ansem the Wise

would've included Roxas's full data in the reconstruction. Meaning, somewhere on your machine there's a log of that data that—" lenzo stopped and shrugged. "Uhh... Basically we can decipher Ansem's Code more quickly, *and* we can analyze the virtual Twilight Town while we're at it."

"Okay. Great! I can't computer, so...do that!"

lenzo smiled at Sora's enthusiasm. "Glad you're following along. Don't worry, we'll handle it. Chip and Dale will be helping me out here on this end. I'll call you back as soon as we know anything more," he said, ending the conversation.

"Thanks."

lenzo was just about to hang up when he remembered one last thing. "Oh, before I forget—a bit of troubling news. It's about one of the Organization's former members. You knew him as Vexen—but to us he was Ansem's apprentice Even."

Vexen... Doesn't ring a bell. Maybe he was one of the Organization members I never met?

"He was recompleted like the rest of us, but hadn't regained consciousness yet. Then, sometime after Lea left, Even vanished. Aelex and Dilan—the two you knew as Lexaeus and Xaldin—they went out looking for him, but...he's just gone. And I'm starting to worry."

"You think he's on *their* side?" Sora asked. Now *he* was getting a bad feeling about this.

"I think it's a real possibility. He's a devious researcher. You should be careful."

"All right. Thanks," Sora replied, ending the call.

"Oh no! We got work! I totally forgot," Hayner exclaimed in a sudden panic, whirling around to leave.

"Really? But what about all this?" asked Pence, flustered.

"Hey, both are important. We're gonna need some cash to go to the beach. Also, don't forget the pretzels. Gotta buy four now."

Pence tilted his head for a moment when Hayner said "four," but he soon

figured it out. “Ohh. I get it.”

The fourth pretzel had to be for Roxas.

“He’s thinking ahead.” Olette smiled at Pence.

“Okay, and since I’m manning the computer here, you guys’re in charge of earning my share.”

“No pretzel for Pence.”

“Hey!”

Sora and the others burst out laughing at the easy banter among the other trio.

“So can we leave you in charge of things here?” Sora asked.

“Sure, no problem!” Pence replied energetically, and then Sora, Donald, and Goofy left the computer room, too.

“Computers really are something,” Sora muttered.

“Yeah, we don’t know the first thing about ’em,” Goofy agreed.

“Good thing we have Pence here to help out!”

“Yeah,” said Donald as the three of them walked outside.

It’s so bright. How did it feel the last time we left this place?

Sora, Donald, and Goofy approached the gates.

“So, you think you can bring Roxas back?” a voice called to them from behind.

And the voice belonged to none other than—

“Ansem!”

Ansem was leaning against one of the gate posts, watching them. A Corridor of Darkness opened next to him, and someone else stepped out.

“Xemnas!”

“Roxas should never have existed in the first place. What you seek is impossible.” Xemnas was being cryptic, but there was no denying his malicious intent.

“Roxas does exist,” Sora protested. “His heart’s inside my heart.” *Roxas will never disappear. Not as long as he’s a part of me.*

“And in the unlikely event you did manage to separate the two,” Xemnas replied, “where is it you think you can put his heart?”

“Well... Roxas used to live in the other Twilight Town, right? So, I’m just gonna put him back there.”

“Do you even realize what you are saying? The other Twilight Town is just data,” Ansem interjected.

“A heart can live anywhere. Even inside data. There are hearts all around us,” Sora declared with an angry look at them

“Ansem and Xemnas used to be part of the same person, right?” Goofy mused. “But look. Now they exist separately just fine. If they can do it, I don’t see any reason why you and Roxas can’t find a way.”

“Oh...yeah!” Sora struck a triumphant pose.

Donald couldn’t resist cheering, either. “Yeah! You tell ’em, Captain Goofy!”

Sora and Donald went back to glaring at Xemnas and Ansem.

“In that case, by all means,” said Ansem.

“Nothing would please us more than Roxas’s return, of course,” Xemnas continued.

“You wish. He’ll never answer to you again.”

They could think whatever they wanted. Roxas was no longer a pawn in their little games, Sora was sure—not while Roxas had friends now. Not while he had bonds.

Unfazed, Xemnas pointed at Sora. “Still so blind. A Nobody is what’s left behind when one gives his heart to darkness. There is only way to bring Roxas back, which is for you to give your heart up as well. Sora, have you finally decided to call upon the darkness?” he asked.

“What?” Sora bit his lip, unable to find a reply.

Is he right? Can I not bring Roxas back without giving my heart to the

darkness? It's just— There has to be some other way.

“Go on, then. The shadows are never out of reach,” Ansem sneered, just as Heartless arrived on all sides of Sora. Meanwhile, Xemnas summoned Nobodies with a slight wave of his arm.

“Now, set your heart free,” the two villains said in unison, taking their leave through a Corridor of Darkness.

“Wait!” Sora started to go after them, but Goofy shouted his name.

“Sora!”

His two friends were surrounded by Heartless and Nobodies. Sora stopped and got his Keyblade ready for action.

“It's not darkness. Not if it helps him!”

Sora charged into yet another battle, but his thoughts were racing as he swung his Keyblade. *I don't need the power of darkness to fight, and I know I can restore Roxas without it, too. Him and Naminé. I don't need to worry about a vessel for their hearts.*

The most important thing is—

Sora took a heavy breath, dismissing the Keyblade now that the fight was over.

“Herc said... He said, ‘With all my heart,’” Sora said softly. Hercules had mentioned a desire to help someone. “Okay. Then all my heart it is. I'm getting Roxas out.” He turned to his friends. “Are you with me, Donald? Goofy?”

“You betcha!” the two said with a grin.

“I don't know what Ansem and Xemnas want, but I think we'd better tell the others to watch out.”

The mansion was an important place now, and there was no telling what kind of trouble it could invite on the town. The three friends headed back toward the more populated area just to be safe.

As Sora, Donald, and Goofy returned to the tram common, they were greeted by a familiar voice.

“Well, bless my bagpipes! It was *you* laddies who rescued my chef.”

“Wak! It’s Uncle Scrooge!” Donald quacked as he realized who the speaker was. It was indeed Scrooge McDuck, wearing his usual top hat and carrying his usual cane, along with a white box.

“Wait... Didn’t he sell ice cream in Hollow Bastion?” asked a puzzled Sora.

“That’s right,” Goofy replied. “But Uncle Scrooge here’s what you might call a world traveler.”

“How are ya, Uncle Scrooge?” Sora said as he ran over to the old duck.

“Oh! Hello, Sora! You’re lookin’ hale and hearty. I heard ye were on another grand adventure with these two. I hope Donald isn’t making a menace of himself.”

“Why did you have to say that?”

Scrooge was about to embarrass him further by pressing the issue, but fortunately, Goofy intervened. “So, Uncle Scrooge, what’s that you were sayin’ about a chef?”

“Och! Right, right. The chef of me bistro here wanted to show ye his appreciation, so he baked this for ye.” Scrooge held out the white box in his hands, and Sora opened it.

“Wow, cake!” Inside was a some sort of pastry smothered in fruit. “The whole cake? It’s for us?” Sora asked, but Scrooge was looking up.

“Aye, settle down... The chef wants ye to know it’s not a cake, but a *tarte aux fruits*.” Scrooge removed his hat to reveal the small rat from earlier sitting on his head. “Why keep it under my hat? May I introduce...Little Chef.”

The rat hopped down onto the top of the hat.

“Uncle Scrooge, you opened a bistro in Twilight Town?” Donald asked.

“Aye. It all started a little while ago, when I was enjoying one of the best meals of my life. And when I asked to meet the chef, I met this wee genius,” Scrooge explained. The rat in question—Remy—puffed his chest out proudly. “As it turns out, he wanted to expand his culinary horizons. So, I thought: That’s an opportunity. And I financed the whole operation.”



Who would've thought a tiny rodent could cook? The fruit tart looked delicious; maybe they could eat it when they needed a little extra energy.

"Hey! Guys!"

"Hayner! Olette!"

Their two friends from Twilight Town came running up to join them.

"Hey, boss. Done with the posters," Hayner reported to Scrooge. Apparently, their part-time job was putting up ads around town.

Olette showed Sora, Donald, and Goofy one of the posters. "Mr. McDuck's hosting an open-air film festival in the courtyard. Cool, huh?"

Sora had no idea they did things like that here in town. Leave it to Scrooge to find a business opportunity anywhere.

"Provide a bit of entertainment, and then give folks a nice, cozy place to relax. Like me bistro here. They'll all be happy, an' hungry, an' ready to spend their money," Scrooge said with an avaricious grin.

"Gawrsh, he sure is canny. I always wondered how he keeps customers comin' into his businesses over and over."

"Oh yeah, I'm no business guy, but I sure wouldn't wanna be one of Uncle Scrooge's competitors."

They all shared a chuckle at Goofy's and Sora's open admiration, but then Sora turned serious again. "Oh! Right. I need to warn you guys."

"Why?" Hayner asked meekly.

"Well, those creepy-crawly things might come back for more, so stay on your toes."

"Sure, but don't we have you guys to take care of 'em for us?"

Hayner was laughing, but Olette seemed worried.

"You have to leave *again*?"

"Yeah," Sora said with a nod. *We have to go—but we'll be back.* "Sorry. Just do me a favor..."

“Well, what is it? Don’t make it too tough,” Hayner warned him with a shrug.

“I know how Roxas feels. To be lost. But Donald and Goofy...Kairi...brought me back by wishing with all their hearts. So...I was hoping the three of you would do the same and wish for Roxas.”

“What? That’s it? That’s no favor. We’ll all wish. I’m wishin’.”

Hayner grinned, and Olette bobbed her head.

“Yeah! Me and Pence, too.”

“Thanks,” Sora said with a soft smile.

That’s right. If you want to wish someone back, one person isn’t enough. You need everyone to want it with everything they have.

I’m sure we can bring Roxas back.

Positive.

Meanwhile—two shadowy figures were coldly observing Sora and his friends with hardened stares from the roof of a building overlooking the bistro: Ansem and Xemnas. Shortly after, Xigbar emerged from a Corridor of Darkness behind them.

“Aren’t you making it a little too obvious?” he said.

“We were instructed to guide him,” Xemnas replied.

“Yes... Just look at them,” Ansem agreed, still watching the scene. “They wouldn’t get far if we did not spell it out.”

“Fair enough. But let’s not forget how many times Sora still managed to rain on our parade.”

Xigbar still had his doubts; they couldn’t be too careful.

Ansem’s mouth twisted into a smirk. “If he wavers from the path we lay, we destroy him.”

“But in that case...we’ll have to find ourselves another vessel.” Xigbar barked a laugh. *Another vessel...*, he says, as if it’s nothing. Just one piece of their grand, far-reaching plan.

“That is why we never have just one iron in the fire,” Xemnas replied matter-of-factly.

The three of them returned to watching the smiling group down below.

INTERMISSION

Letter

I'm sorry I left without saying good-bye. Did Master Yen Sid tell you? I'm training to become a Keyblade wielder like you. That's right. No more waiting for you to come back from your adventures. I want to get out there and do my part to help.

Merlin has used his magic to bring us to a place where time doesn't matter. We can take as long as we need to complete our training. He's an amazing wizard. Oh, and by "us," I mean me and Lea. He's really sorry for all the trouble he caused. I told him it's fine, but he won't stop apologizing. I'll admit I was a little scared of him at first, but I've gotten to know him better. All he ever wanted was to help his friend. Honestly, it's hard not to like him.

Every now and then, I catch him staring at me. When I ask what's wrong, he says, "I'm not sure. I think I'm forgetting something. Don't know what." Sora, I think it may have something to do with you. Your journey is all about helping people: some that you've never met before, and some like Lea that you have. They're all counting on you. It won't be easy, but I hope you'll remain the happy and cheerful Sora that I know. There's no heart your smile can't reach.

Kairi was writing a letter to Sora.

She always came to the hill here to watch the sun set after she finished training for the day. Sometimes Axel—Lea—joined her, and sometimes he didn't. Today, she sensed someone coming behind her, and she turned around. "What's wrong?"

Lea looked a little out of it and scratched his head. "Nothin', sorry."

"Lea... You're doing it again."

He was always saying he was sorry; by now it was almost habit. She'd told him he didn't need to so many times, but he kept doing it. The thought had crossed

her mind that he was apologizing for more than just what he'd done to her as Axel in the past. *Sometimes—I wonder if some of those apologies aren't meant for someone else.*

"Ack, sorry."

Kairi couldn't help but smile, even as he did it again.

Lea sat down on a stone a short ways away from her as she went back to writing. "A letter?" he asked.

"Yup."

"To Sora?"

"Mmm, technically yes. But I won't send it. It's more for me."

A letter she didn't plan to send— This wasn't the first. She hadn't really expected him to get that other letter, either. *Thinking of you, wherever you are...*

"Ask Merlin. He'll deliver it for you."

"Yeah, but it's okay. I just like talking to Sora, even if it's on paper."

"Okay," Lea said, observing Kairi's face the entire time. He always did that. Lea didn't seem like the type of person to stare at others, but when they were together, he couldn't take his eyes off her for some reason. Somehow, Kairi knew he needed to—that it was part of helping him recover an important memory.

"Oh." Lea gasped before pulling out two sticks of blue ice cream. Sea-salt ice cream, to be exact. He offered one to Kairi. "Here."

"Ice cream? Really?"

"Yeah, I asked Merlin to pick these up. Ya know, we both did summon Keyblades. Gotta celebrate."

"You're sweet, Lea."

He had gone back to staring at Kairi once she started eating her ice cream, only this time he seemed a little happier.

"What?" she asked him, puzzled.

Lea averted his eyes awkwardly. “N-nothing, I just...”

“You’re trying to remember what you forgot?”

“Well, I, uh... Yeah... Yeah.”

Flustered, he turned back toward the sunset, perhaps recalling something. Something deeply meaningful to him.

“So, tomorrow—you and me in the ring. You ready?” Kairi asked, waving her stick of sea-salt ice cream around like a Keyblade, but Lea still had his eyes on the sun. There was no telling what was on his mind.

There was a hint of melancholy in his voice when he answered. “Course.”

“Don’t hold back, Lea. Promise?” Kairi said. She had no doubt that Lea—Axel—was the better fighter between them.

Lea spun toward her and froze, eyes wide. The sea-salt ice cream slipped from his hand, and then silent tears suddenly spilled down his cheeks.

“Huh? Are you okay? Lea!”

Startled, Kairi hurried over to him. She had never seen a man older than her cry like this before. Not this hard, certainly.

“Yeah... Sorry...”

“You’re crying. What’s wrong?”

Lea wiped his eyes and got to his feet, the barest trace of a bashful smile on his lips. “Something in my eyes.”

“Lea...”

He shrugged. “I’m...gonna go. Sorry.”

“Kay, but stop apologizing.”

Lea had already started to leave, but he stopped and looked back at Kairi. “Fine... On one condition.”

“What?”

He smiled, a little bigger this time, and pointed a finger at his temple. “Call me Axel from now on. Got it memorized?”

“Yeah. Okay, Axel,” Kairi replied with a grin. Axel it was, then.

At Kairi’s feet, the fallen bar of sea-salt ice cream was resting among the four-leaf clovers at Kairi’s feet.

INTERMISSION

Radiant Garden

MEANWHILE, IN RADIANT GARDEN, DILAN LED RIKU and Mickey into the courtyard where they had apparently discovered Terra-Xehanort.

“So, this is where Aqua fell into the realm of darkness after she dove in to save Terra?” Riku asked Mickey, taking in the sights around them.

“Yeah, she said he was acting strange.”

“Strange how, exactly?”

“She sensed darkness in him, and they ended up getting into a big fight.”

That was food for thought. “Around the same time, the guards found a stranger with white hair lying unconscious here in the square—a man calling himself ‘Xehanort,’” Riku mused. “All three of them had been here together, but he was the only one who remained...”

Mickey continued the story, perhaps trying to organize his own thoughts. “Ansem the Wise took the stranger in, but that was a mistake. Xehanort betrayed his master, stole his research, and along with his fellow apprentices, separated his heart from his body.”

At the end of their first adventure, Sora had ultimately defeated a man who went by the name Ansem. However, he was actually Xehanort, an apprentice of the true Ansem the Wise who had taken his name. Sora had bested the impostor back then, but as fate would have it, that wasn’t where it ended.

“Xehanort’s heart took his master’s name, ‘Ansem,’ and traveled to the past to give his younger self instructions. He even briefly had control of you.” Mickey was referring to the mysterious man in the brown robe who Riku had encountered just prior to his first adventure, before Xehanort had been defeated. “His empty body stayed in the present, took the name Xemnas, and founded Organization XIII. Their goal was to prepare thirteen vessels for

Xehanort's heart. Until we put an end to the Organization. But all the while, young Xehanort had been visiting the future to choose thirteen vessels of his own—hearts with strong enough ties to him to make a new Organization—the *real* Organization XIII."

During Riku and Sora's second quest, the Organization had tried and failed to gather those thirteen vessels. Their final opponent then had been Xemnas—Xehanort's Nobody, the empty husk left after his heart fell to darkness.

"And now they're looking for a fight with us. But what happened to Terra? I thought you said that Aqua saved him." Riku mulled over the facts they had so far. *Is this where Terra vanished...?* Something didn't fit.

"Yep, she did. The problem is we didn't notice." Mickey had noticed the problem, too, but he was starting to put the pieces together. "You remember the end of the Mark of Mastery exam, when Master Xehanort made his grand return? That's the Xehanort I remember. He was already a pretty old man then."

Oh, I remember. The bald old man— He was creepy.

"But how do you explain Ansem and Xemnas, his Heartless and Nobody? Isn't it strange how young they look? Why aren't *they* old men? It's because Xehanort was using a different body when the split happened. That face from the portrait I mentioned—it wasn't just some stranger Ansem the Wise took under his wing. It was the young man whose body Xehanort had possessed."

Riku realized what Mickey was trying to say. "No way! That was Terra? Master Xehanort was using Terra?"

Mickey started speaking faster as everything fell into place. "Yep. Master Xehanort told us 'another on our list' belonged to him. He was talking about Terra. Turns out, Aqua saved more than just her friend that day."

If he was right about all this, then that would explain everything—except for one unanswered question.

"Okay, but Master Xehanort is an old man again now. Where did Terra's body go?"

"Hmm... It's 'cause Master Xehanort's collecting vessels! He claimed to have

two of our seven lights.”

Master Xehanort had indeed said as much during their encounter in the Sleeping Worlds, and one of the two he mentioned turned out to be Sora. Meaning...

Mickey couldn't hide his shock at the conclusion. “We got Sora back, but Terra must still be on Xehanort's side.”

“He's with Organization XIII? We should warn Sora.”

Was Master Xehanort still on the hunt for his thirteen vessels? Or had he found them all already?

Riku and Mickey had discovered the enemy's plan, at least, and they shared a grim nod.



Chapter 5

TOY BOX

Chapter 5

Toy Box

ON THE TELEVISION SCREEN, A YOUNG MAN WAS fighting in a big, unfamiliar city. He had silver hair and eyes of different colors. He had two companions as well: a young man with red hair and a hat, and another young man with glasses.

The three of them were fighting their way toward a beautiful woman who had been captured by robots. The silver-haired boy reached out to her as light bloomed around them, and just before their fingertips could touch—

The title of the game appeared in big letters on the screen: *VERUM REX*.

A second later, the screen of the TV went dark. Someone had stepped on the remote—someone in a cowboy hat who looked like a toy. His name was Woody.

“I was watching that!” complained Rex—a dinosaur toy.

“Ah, sorry. But this is no time for television, Rex.” Woody sighed, walking by with a block in his arms.

“Gotta say, that Gigas is pretty impressive,” commented Hamm, who was a piggy bank.

“Really? I like Yozora most,” Rex replied.

The Gigas were the robots on the TV commercial earlier, while Yozora was the young man with silver hair.

Just then, Woody jumped over to them and pushed Hamm and Rex to the ground to protect them.

“Woody? What gives?” Hamm protested, but Woody’s round eyes were fixed on the black haze rising in the middle of the room. Heartless.

“Are they back?” called a toy dressed like a space ranger behind them. This was Buzz.

“All right, guys. Today we teach those masked intruders who’s boss. Is everybody in position?” Woody asked.



Buzz nodded, but Rex just looked over at Hamm. “Wait. Hold on!” he sputtered. “I don’t think I’m emotionally prepared!!”

“Would you calm down? Don’t worry, I got ya covered,” said the cowboy, glancing up at the green army men on standby on the shelves. He turned toward the desk and made sure the three-eyed little green men next to the globe were okay, too.

“It’s go time,” said Buzz to Woody, who nodded. But then—

“Wait!”

“What are you doing?!”

“Who are those guys?”

Buzz and Woody looked on as strange toys they had never seen before emerged from beneath the bed.

“What in the world? Where are we?” Sora took in the strange sights around him, wide-eyed, with Donald and Goofy. Then he noticed his hands. “Oh my gosh!” he yelped. “Have we been shrunk? And... And look at us!”

He looked just like a toy, all the way down to his body, hair, clothes, and size. Donald and Goofy were no different.

“You know what the magic is for. We have to protect the world order,” Donald reminded him. This certainly wasn’t the first time they’d transformed to fit in on a new world.

“Gawrsh... Who’s gonna protect the order from them?” Goofy drawled as he pointed out the enemies.

“Heartless!”

Sora called his Keyblade to his hand and rushed in. Even the Heartless resembled toys here. After the battle was over and the three heroes were taking a breather, Hamm came over and called out to them. “Are you new?”

For toys, the arrival of newcomers to the room was a major event. After all, their owner, Andy, had been known to favor his newer toys. Rex didn’t seem to mind, though, running up to Sora excitedly.

“Wait! Ah— Ah— You look familiar! I know this. You’re, uh, you’re, uhhh...”

The dinosaur’s excitement helped Hamm make the connection. “Yozora!” he cried.

“Huh? My name’s Sora.” Sora seemed a bit nonplussed. The name was similar, sure, but it definitely wasn’t his.

“Stay back!” Buzz called. He was keeping his distance, and his laser was pointed squarely at them. “For all we know, the intruders sent them.”

“We can trust them! They’re the number-one-selling heroes in the country!” Rex gushed as he pulled Sora into a hug.

Hamm seemed happy, too. “Yeah, Andy’s mom must’ve bought ’em for him.”

“Hamm’s right. Did you see how easily they took care of the intruders? I bet they’re here to figure out why all our friends have gone missing, and why Buzz’s laser started actually laser-ing...and all the weird stuff that’s been going on. I mean that’s what heroes do, right?”

While Rex chattered away, Woody and Buzz gave some thought to the situation.

Sora was getting the impression that not everything was as it should be in this world.

“So, you’re Andy’s new toys?” Woody asked.

“Toys?”

That briefly threw Sora and his friends for a loop, but the cowboy was right. They did look like toys at the moment—like action figures, to be precise.

Woody was still talking. “You sure did a number on those intruders,” he said.

“Those are Heartless,” Goofy explained about the intruders—their foes that dwelled in the darkness.

“We’ve been fighting against those ‘intruders’ for a while,” Sora said on behalf of his team.

“I knew it!” Rex called, elated.

“Okay. In that case, you’re all right by me. My name’s Woody. Put ’er there.”

“Hey.”

Woody and Sora shook hands.

“I’m Sora—”

“Yozora!” Rex interjected before Sora could finish giving his name.

“Actually, my name’s *Sora*...”

“And I’m Donald.”

“I’m Goofy.”

Once the newcomers had introduced themselves, it was the toys’ turn to share their names.

“I’m Rex! I’m your biggest fan. In fact, I’ve been playing your game for months now. And I’ve already gotten you all the way up to level forty-seven. But that Bahamut boss is really tough. Slinky and I can’t figure out how to beat him. Oh, I wish Slinky and the others were here. They’d be so happy to meet you!” Rex rambled on and on, delighted.

Next, the green army men came down from the shelves and saluted Sora and his companions. “All troops at attention, sir!”

Then, a trio of identical aliens came rolling up on a skateboard and gave what must have been their form of a greeting.

“Strangers.”

“From the outside.”

“Welcome.”

“They’re all toys? So that’s why we look the way we do.” Sora was finally beginning to understand, but one person was still having trouble accepting the situation—Buzz.

“Excuse me,” he said. “You said that you’ve battled those intruders before. Tell us where and why.”

“Oh... Well, uh... We are—”

Donald cut Sora’s answer short. “Order!”

Oh yeah, we aren't supposed to tell anyone. How am I supposed to explain, then?

"Well? You must have come from somewhere." Buzz eyed the three outsiders with suspicion, and the army men started doing the same. Before the situation could get worse, Woody stepped in.

"Take it easy, Buzz. What matters is that they got those intruders out of our way for at least a little while. No need to interrogate 'em."

Rex and Hamm were inclined to agree, but the space ranger still wasn't convinced.

"Hey... Have those 'intruders'—the Heartless—been a problem around here?" Sora asked Woody.

"No, they just showed up a little while ago."

"In fact, those 'Heartless' materialized right after all our friends up and vanished," Buzz added.

Sora and his friends shared a look.

"It wasn't always this lonely. One day we woke up, and we were the only toys left here. Nobody's heard from Mom, or Molly, or Andy... We keep waiting for Andy to come home," Woody said sadly as he looked at the name written on the bottom of his boot.

This Andy must be close with all the toys here, Sora thought. "You really care about him."

Woody nodded. "Yeah... He's the best friend that toys like us could ever hope to have."

"All right. We'd better start looking!"

"Huh?"

"Have you got any clues we can go on—any other strange things that happened?" Sora asked.

Now it was the toys' turn to share a glance.

"Well... Hmm," Woody said. "There's one thing."

“After everyone went MIA, the intruders didn’t come alone,” Buzz explained. “They arrived with a guy wearing a hood, dressed in black, just like you. As a matter of fact, he’s the only other new toy we’ve seen outside of you three.”

A black hood? But that means...

“The Organization?” Goofy and Donald cried in unison.

“You know who it is?”

“Yeah. They’re bad news,” Sora told Woody gravely. Whatever was happening on this world, the Heartless and the Organization were part of it. “We may have a hunch what’s causing all the weirdness. Would you mind if we handle this?”

“I’m sorry. But we’re not gonna leave this to you. If that guy has something to do with our friends vanishing, then he’s our problem, too. We’ve got to work together.”

Woody’s answer was firm. He wasn’t about to leave his world’s problems to someone else. Sora and his friends could appreciate that.

“The latest reports place the target in town, sir. At Galaxy Toys!” the green army men stated, as if they had been waiting to do so for some time.

“Then Galaxy Toys is where we’re going. Sora, follow me.”

Buzz stopped Woody before he could leave. “Not so fast, cowboy. You seem pretty gung ho about going, but shouldn’t we stay here and wait for Andy?”

“Well... You’ve got a point, but...we’ve tried waiting. Look, if we go with Sora, we might find a clue. Are you with me, Buzz?” he asked, turning back to his friend.

“Of course.” Buzz sighed and deflated a little.

Sora smiled. He could tell they shared a strong bond of trust.

In order to reach Galaxy Toys, the new toy store in town, they needed to go outside through the window.

They had quite a large crew with them. Woody, Buzz, Hamm, Rex, the army men, and the little green men. *Hopefully no one gets lost.*

“Okay, let’s move out!” Sora leaped down from the window to the roof,

where more Heartless lay in wait.

Woody drew the gun at his hip, while Buzz shot lasers from his arm. Not only were they good in a fight, but they were careful to keep their fellow toys out of harm's way.

The whole crew descended from the roof to the street and hurried ahead. At the end of the road, there was a big building that looked like a shopping mall.

"Let's go!"

They went inside and found an enormous hall jam-packed with toys of all kinds, including an eye-catching display of toy robots.

Rex and Hamm ran over to it. The Gigas robots were from the same video game as Yozora, the one they'd been playing.

Something felt strange about all this to Sora. "Hey, why doesn't *that* toy move?" he asked Buzz.

"I guess it hasn't figured it out," the space ranger replied, looking up at the Gigas.

"Hasn't figured it out"? What does that mean? Sora wondered.

Just then, someone spoke from on top of the big capsule machine in the center of the hall. "I can make it move for you."

A man in a black coat stepped out from the Corridor of Darkness and removed his hood to reveal his long silver hair and gold eyes.

"You're from the dream—the first of the Xehanorts!" Sora shouted.

"I'm so honored you remember me."

The younger Xehanort snapped his fingers, summoning Heartless that jumped onboard the Gigas.

"Oh no! He *can* move!" Buzz exclaimed in surprise just as a robot tried to bring one of its massive arms down on Hamm. Sora, Donald, and Goofy managed to stop the blow in just the nick of time.

Young Xehanort didn't seem particularly concerned as he offered his analysis of the situation. "Our heart's shadows fill the emptiness of another. See how

they bring him to life? Like Heartless and Nobodies, they fit together.”

“Enough. Why are you doing this?!”

“There’s a darkness we are missing and must reclaim. The way hearts connect in this world can provide us with a clue. So we made a copy of the world and then pulled those hearts apart. I wonder how you’ll handle the strain.” Instead of giving a real answer, young Xehanort quietly opened another Corridor of Darkness.

“Wait! What does that mean?” Sora called for him to stop, but young Xehanort only paused for a moment.

“Don’t let me down.” With those chilling parting words, he melted into the shadows.

Sora, Goofy, and Donald were too busy keeping Gigas’s fists at bay to chase him. Before long, the robot’s strength won out and sent them all tumbling away.

“Look out!”

Woody caught Sora, while Buzz opened his wings and managed to rescue Donald and Goofy.

“Woody! What is going on? Is this toy a friend...or foe?” Buzz yelled.

The Gigas robot chose that moment to fire one of its powerful cannons.

“I think we’ve got your answer!” the toy cowboy shouted back as he shielded Sora and his friends. They barely managed to get behind the cover of the other toys on display—the battle against the giant robot was starting to seem hopeless. Unless they tried something new.

“Sora! You’re up!” Donald smiled up at Sora.

“Yeah! If the Heartless know how to do it, there’s no reason you can’t,” Goofy agreed.

Sora cocked his head to one side, unsure of what they were getting at. “Do what?”

Donald pointed. “Over there!”

Another Gigas without a Heartless at the helm stood tall and powerful, just waiting for him.

“Brilliant! I’m on it!” Now that he knew what they meant, Sora dashed over to the Gigas’s feet and jumped inside the cockpit in its head.

I’ve never operated a mech before, but I bet it’ll be fun. Plus, I’ve flown the Gummi Ship, right? Sora punched a random button.

“Wawak!” Donald scrambled out of the way of the cannon fire.

“Sorry!”

Uh, maybe not. Sora targeted the hostile Gigas bearing down on him. *Okay, now we have a fighting chance.*

Donald, Goofy, Woody, and Buzz cheered him on from below.

Sora’s clever piloting beat back the enemy Gigas, and each one fell still after the Heartless vanished from its cockpit. After an intense battle, the last of the robots stood motionless, and Sora hopped down from the pilot seat.

Seeing the immobile robots, Buzz fell into thought.

“Buzz?” Sora asked with concern.

“It’s nothing,” Buzz replied dismissively. “I’m confused. That guy in the black coat—did he say he made a copy of the real world? What’s that mean?”

“It...probably means they split this world in two—your friends in one world, us in the other. Only one of the worlds is real, and the other is just really convincing.”

“You can’t be serious. Oh! That’s right, you’re from a video game.” Buzz snorted at Sora’s theory. “Well, maybe in your game that’s how things work, but here in reality you can’t ‘split worlds.’”

Well, Buzz’s reaction was understandable. Sora probably wouldn’t believe it either if someone tried to tell him his world was not only one of many, but one of two parallel versions of itself.

“This is ridiculous. Woody, let’s go.” Buzz turned away and walked off.

“I admit, it does sound just a little far-fetched. But say we *have* been taken to

some kind of alternate world. That would explain why your laser's real," Woody admonished him gently. "And is it really that crazy? Worse than 'evil emperors' and 'protecting the galaxy'? Any of that ring a bell?" he added.

Buzz coughed nervously.

Sora guessed that was part of Buzz's original story.

"Point taken. But that just means these strangers are part of the delusion. And I say it's time we parted ways and went home."

Buzz's insistence on doubting them was beginning wear down Sora, Goofy, and Donald.

"Look, I get that it seems weird," said Sora, "but we know something's wrong with this place. We should stick together."

"Sora's right," Woody agreed, trying to persuade his stubborn friend. "They helped with the intruders, so they might help find our friends. They have been there for us so far. You can't deny that. Come on. Every toy deserves a fair shake."

Buzz pointed at one of the lifeless Gigas. "Tell it to that toy over there," he snapped.

He was right; none of them wanted to fight their fellow toys. But still, what were they supposed to do about any of that?

They had apparently reached an impasse—but that was when a sergeant of the green army men came hurrying over and said, "Sheriff, sir. Rex has just been dino-napped!"

"What's that?!" Woody asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"And Hamm and the aliens are MIA."

They must've run away during the battle—or maybe they got taken, too.

"Come on. We have got to find them!" Woody said, ready to take off right then.

"Please, let us help!" Sora implored, running beside him.

Realizing Buzz hadn't come with him, the cowboy stopped and went back to

talk him out of his doubts.

“Well, Buzz? Do you really think we can save our friends on our own? We didn’t get very far before. We gotta take all the help we can get.”

“Don’t worry,” Goofy said. “Sora can be reckless, and Donald grumbles a lot...”

It was unclear where Goofy was going with this, exactly, but Sora nodded along anyway. “Yeah!”

Then Goofy reached his point. “But you can trust ‘em!”

It took a moment, but Donald soon picked up on what was wrong with this picture.

“Hey! He suspects you, too!” he quacked sharply. Why would Buzz believe anything Goofy had to say?

“It’s true,” agreed Sora, again nodding along.

“Huh? He does?” Goofy seemed confused.

Woody laughed. “See, they don’t seem bad. Am I right, Buzz?”

At this point, the space ranger didn’t have much choice but to accept defeat and admit they were all right. “Okay, fine. We do need the extra help.” He still had his eyes on them, though.

“Thanks for the help, Sora, Donald, Goofy,” Woody said with a shrug.

“My troops will return to the field, sir!” announced the sergeant of the green army men, and the little soldiers scattered.

“Guess we’ll have to check each department one by one,” Sora said, and then the search for the missing toys was underway.

Galaxy Toys was divided into several sections, each dedicated to a different category of toys.

I wonder if Woody and the others waited here to make some child’s dream come true, too?

“They’ve got all kinds of toys here, huh,” Sora remarked with interest, still making sure to keep his eyes peeled for anything strange around them.

“Including us!” drawled Goofy, who was raising an ear to check for sounds from time to time.

One of the army men came running up. “We’ve found them! They’re in the dolls section!”

“Got it! Let’s go!”

Everyone nodded along with Woody and set off running.

On the way there, they fought their way through quite a few toys that had come to life as Heartless—toys that had presumably once been just like Woody.

“Watch out!” Buzz blasted a Heartless that almost got to Sora.

“I owe ya one, Buzz! Are you okay with this, though?”

“If it wanted to play nice, then it should’ve stayed away from my friends,” Buzz replied with determination, perhaps to convince himself as much as anyone else.

We have to find a way to free these toys from the control of the Heartless.

Sora fought on with his Keyblade, even though he didn’t necessarily want to.

So far, Sora and his comrades had managed to save Rex and, once they reached the doll section, one of the army men, too. They were still searching among the dolls.

“I don’t see him anywhere...,” said a confused Woody as his eyes swept over the area. The team crept forward cautiously, aware that any of these toys could be under Heartless control.

“Wak!”

Donald hid behind Sora when a big dollhouse in the very back of the section suddenly rattled.

“Something isn’t right here,” said Buzz, heading straight for the fishy play set. It looked like someone was stuck inside.

Sora and his friends pooled all their strength to pull open the doors of the dollhouse.

“Talk about cabin fever. Thanks for the save,” said Hamm as he ambled out

from inside.

“You okay, Hamm?”

“Yeah, aside from being locked in, the accommodations were fine,” the piggy bank replied easily, allaying the cowboy’s concerns.

Donald took a curious peek into the house, which was full of tiny furniture in a pleasant enough living space—except...

“Gwawak!” he cried. A female doll with pretty blue hair in a black dress was staring right at him through a window on the other side of the house.

“She’s back! That’s the doll who pigpenned me!” Hamm yelled as the Angelic Amber doll that had been transformed into a Heartless loomed over them.

Hamm and Rex ran to hide beside some other toys.

“One stay in the dread-and-breakfast was enough for me!”

“I’ve had enough of this!”

Buzz made sure they got away, then trained his laser on Angelic Amber. “Not another possessed toy...,” he muttered softly as he fired a beam. The doll’s hair stood on end, and her eyes flashed.

“Y-yikes!” Sora squeaked as he joined the fray with his Keyblade in hand.

Angelic Amber shuffled across the floor and flung herself at them.

“Don’t take another step!”

Buzz fired his laser, and Donald followed up with a barrage of magic while she was stunned. Meanwhile, Sora sprang off Goofy’s shield and slammed his Keyblade down onto the doll’s head.

There was a short pause, and then Angelic Amber fell still.

“...Did we get her?” Donald said as he edged warily up to the doll.

Goofy was right behind him. “Looks like it, a-hyuck!”

But suddenly, Angelic Amber sprang into motion again.

“This has gone far enough!” Buzz shouted. He extended the wings on his backpack and flew into the air, firing off a volley of laser beams. Finally, Angelic

Amber crumpled to the floor. He walked somberly over to the doll; she had to be down for the count now. “What if we end up just like her? Forgetting ourselves and...attacking each other?”

Sora placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “No way, Buzz. That won’t happen.”

“You can’t be sure! What if I get taken over, then attack you?”

“Buzz, you’re overthinking it.” Woody tried to console his friend, but Buzz only shook his head.

“Yeah,” Sora agreed. “The Heartless—the darkness—can only creep in when our hearts falter. Trust me. You’ll be fine if you don’t lose heart.”

If he knows how the Heartless work, then a guy like Buzz has nothing to worry about, thought Sora.

Woody knew Buzz better than anyone, and he felt the same way. “Well, that’s good. Because I know you, Buzz. You’ll never lose heart when it comes to your friends.”

Woody’s reassurance finally sank in, and Buzz’s expression softened somewhat.

“True enough, cowboy. Sorry to have worried you all.”

“Now, let’s go find the others.”

“It’s going to be dangerous, so you guys head back to the main hall,” Buzz said gently to Hamm. Rex was probably already there.

With that, Sora and crew headed for the babies and toddlers section, where they saved the little green men from getting abducted by a UFO.

“Fear not.”

“We still have our new home.”

“The Chamber of Andy.”

With that, the aliens headed to the exit.

“They’re right. This isn’t where we belong. We’ve been in this toy store long enough. It’s time for us to go home to Andy’s room,” Buzz agreed. It was a

reasonable conclusion to make, in Sora's opinion, considering everything this toy store had put them through. But it wasn't enough.

"But...Xehanort told us that isn't even his real room," Sora reminded Buzz.

The space ranger turned his back and started trudging away. "Can you prove that any of that nonsense is true? And even if that Andy's room *is* fake, it doesn't mean he's not somewhere in this world with us. I'm going home to wait for him. No more debate." Woody shook his head slowly, and Buzz turned to him. If anyone could see where he was coming from, it was his friend. "You with me, Woody?"

"Hmm..." The cowboy thought for a moment longer while Buzz headed back to the entrance.

"You're right, Buzz." He smiled at Sora. "Now that we're all accounted for, we should meet up at the entrance and go home."

Sora was disappointed at first, but he soon smiled back. "Okay. We could have used friends like you in the final showdown..."

"But Organization XIII is our problem to solve," Goofy added, tacitly letting them know he understood.

Donald did the same with a characteristic boast. "Yeah, I can take 'em!"

And of course, Sora had to add his own two cents. "I'm not so sure about that..."

"I'll show ya!" Donald shouted as he took the bait and chased after Sora. Even Woody and Buzz were getting used to the routine by this point.

Once they were back at the entrance, they did a roll call to make sure everyone was accounted for. Hamm, the aliens, and the army men were all there, but...

Woody paused to think. "Wait. Where's Rex?"

The dinosaur should have come back here earlier, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Aw, he took off," Hamm explained unhappily. "Said he wanted to prove to you he could trust Sora. He's up there by the video games."

Buzz couldn't believe it. "Well, here we go again."

"He's not safe," said Sora. "The Heartless are out there."

Rex had mistaken Sora and his friends as heroes from a video game, but he had still put himself in danger just to prove they were trustworthy to Woody and Buzz. The cowboy and space ranger looked at each other.

"You're right. Sora, Donald, Goofy... Any chance you could help us one last time?" Woody asked.

"Sure!" Sora chirped.

Woody's face lit up. "Thanks, guys..."

He was just as happy as Sora had been to have friends he could count on. Buzz likely felt the same way.

"Let's go!"

Woody turned to Buzz, who responded with a nod and a wave.

In the video game section on the third floor, they found Rex rummaging around for something, completely oblivious to the worry he had caused.

"Look! Look! I found it!" He dropped down from a shelf in the *Verum Rex* display and shoved a copy in Sora's face. "See, Sora?" The cover art portrayed a young man with silver hair.

Sora noticed a giant *Verum Rex* standee on the sales floor, too.

"Well, I never look *this* good. The clothes kinda match," Sora commented as he inspected the hero on the box. They both had checkers, and maybe they slightly resembled each other—but if anything, this guy looked like...

"See? I told ya, Buzz... They're toys, just like the rest of us," said Woody as he looked up at one of the displays. The space ranger crossed his arms and nodded.

Meanwhile, Sora and Donald were whispering to each other. "Donald, I thought your magic decided how I look. Explain."

"Simple. That's not you."

"Say, doesn't he remind you of Riku?"

Donald and Goofy said exactly what Sora had been thinking—the character on the box reminded him a little of Riku. Not just his hair color, but his whole vibe.

“Must be him!” Donald cackled.

Sora couldn’t let the taunt go unanswered. “No! I’ve got the black clothes and, uh...”

“So what?”

“All right, everyone. Now that we’re back together, it’s time to return to Andy’s room,” Buzz said wearily as he watched Sora and Donald arguing again out of the corner of his eye.

“Now? But can’t I at least check the strategy guides? I want to know how to beat Bahamut!”

Rex was engrossed in the magazines.

“Next time. Right now, we need to go home.” Buzz patted the dinosaur on the snout before walking off.

Disappointed, Rex returned the magazine to the shelf.

But then a familiar voice brought everyone to a halt. “Oh, but you needn’t rush off.” It was young Xehanort. “I have more to observe. I can’t let you leave yet.” He chuckled.

“If it’s us you really want, leave the others out of this.”

Sora had his Keyblade out for a fight, but young Xehanort was still laughing. “You *would* say that, champion of light. Very well, let’s skip to the final stage.”

A second later, a Heartless snuck up on Buzz from behind—a Heartless shaped like a marionette—and wrapped him in shadows. The strength drained from Buzz and left him lifeless and limp, just like a puppet. As his eyes reopened, he raised his right arm and aimed his laser right at Woody’s forehead.

“C’mon, Buzz. Quit fooling around.”

Buzz fired.

“Look out!” Goofy shouted, just barely intercepting the blast with his shield.

“I can’t believe it! Buzz has been taken over?”

The cowboy stepped weakly toward his friend, but Buzz only fired again. Goofy deflected that blast, too.

“What did you do to him?!” Sora yelled as he rushed at young Xehanort, his Keyblade ready to strike.

“I thought I made it clear. I am testing the strength of their bonds.” He avoided Sora’s swift downward slash with a quick step back. “In this world, toys have hearts. And those hearts come from a powerful bond. So what happens when those bonds are stretched to their limit? When they are worlds apart, can cloth and plastic hold on to their hearts?”

Sora couldn’t land a hit; as soon as he swung, the silver-haired boy would blink away and reappear somewhere else.

Meanwhile, the young Xehanort continued his monologue. “All I needed was a wedge to widen the divide—someone like you to fill them with distrust and doubt. And that chasm you created can be filled with a vast darkness. Witness it for yourself.”

Sora held his Keyblade ready for anything, glaring furiously.

“Sora!”

Donald and Rex were trying their hardest to stop Buzz, while Goofy protected Woody from the laser blasts behind his shield.

“On my way!”

Sora was about to hurry over when young Xehanort seized him by the arm and lifted him into the air.

“Not this time!” he snarled. He slammed a glowing red orb into Sora’s chest and sent him flying.

Sora was launched all the way into a world like nothing he’d ever seen before. He was on something that resembled the roof of a factory, surrounded by a metal fence, and there were more buildings nearby.

“Haven’t you heard? In this world, you come from a video game. So now, you can watch my experiment from inside that screen. That is...if you manage to find a moment’s rest.” With that, young Xehanort vanished.

Sora was inside the game *Verum Rex*, and several Gigas mechs were coming his way.

“Uh-oh!” I have to get out of here quick and help Buzz and Woody!

Sora charged over to one of Gigas and hit it with his Keyblade until it stopped attacking. He climbed aboard, then used it to take down the others. He was starting to panic a little.

C’mon— Can’t this go any faster?!

Woody and Buzz trust each other. They have such a strong bond, just like me with all my friends. The Organization doesn’t get to do whatever they want to them, or any of the other toys here. I won’t let them.

Just when Sora was losing track of how long he had been here and how many Gigas he had defeated, the last mech went down, and the game spit him out.

“Sora!”

Woody, Donald, and Goofy were there to greet him.

“Wait... Where’s Buzz?” Sora asked.

“He disappeared into a dark corridor.”

...And of course, that dark corridor was already long gone. Sora didn’t have the ability to open his own, either.

What do we do now?

That was when a small green sergeant spoke up. “Well, it might be a long shot, but we saw a shadowy portal in the Kid Korral.”

“Sarge, you’re a lifesaver!” Woody exclaimed.

In light of the danger, they decided to send all the toys to the entrance except for Woody, who would accompany Sora and his team to the Kid Korral.

Sure enough, they found an open dark portal inside of a vent.

“Here goes.”

At Sora’s signal, the four of them stepped through.

Buzz was floating in the center of a murky black haze, and young Xehanort

was standing directly in their way.

“What do you want with my friend?” Woody asked.

“Look... Such tremendous darkness. All because he was ripped away from the boy who cares about him most.” The young Xehanort looked back at the darkness rising up behind Buzz.

“Does that mean...we’ll all be like Buzz...if we don’t...find Andy?”

But before Woody could doubt any further, Sora stepped in. “Wrong! Distance doesn’t matter. Andy’s part of their hearts, just like my friends are part of mine.”

“Yeah!” Donald and Goofy agreed fiercely.

“You can’t rip that apart!” Sora got his Keyblade ready for action.

Woody looked at the name on the bottom of his shoe, remembering what it meant. Sora was right.

“What? *Your friends are your power?* Ah... How very true. But if the light of friendship is a form of power...the darkness of being alone is a power...even greater.” The darkness wove in on itself, layer upon layer like fabric, and at its center, young Xehanort stood. His eyes shone with conviction as he gazed up into the shadowy column. “Darkness is the heart’s true nature.”

Sora faltered momentarily, but he soon felt an encouraging hand on his shoulder as Woody stepped forward, coolly confronting the darkness and its lies.

“Whatever you’re talking about, I don’t care. Put Buzz back the way he was, then get lost!”

“Or else what, toy?”

“Yeah, I am a toy. And a friend. My guess is no one’s ever loved you before. Because you know *nothing* about hearts and love.”

With each step Woody took toward young Xehanort, light spread from his feet.

Sora came to stand beside him. “There are hearts all around us, trying to

connect. Your loneliness only made Woody and Buzz's connection stronger. *That's* the heart's true nature—to never ever let go. Wherever they are, Andy and the other toys haven't let go, either."

"Yeah! You can't keep us from Andy."

The darkness around them was rolling away.

"We're going home no matter what. And taking Buzz!" Woody continued.

"Xehanort, you're so caught up in finding the shadows, that you forgot about the light that cast them."

The words, their willpower, became a ring of pure light dispelling the darkness young Xehanort had summoned. Xehanort recoiled as the light took shape and flew to Buzz.

"No!"

Sora, Goofy, and Donald took advantage of the distraction to attack. Xehanort managed to block their blows, but he was now trapped in place.

"Woody, now!" Sora shouted.

Woody jumped into the air and threw the pull string attached to his back like a lasso at a piece of wood hovering behind Buzz. The ring hooked firmly on to the block, and Woody swung over to his friend. Once he had hold of Buzz, the two of them dropped to the ground together.

A voice came from Woody's back as the impromptu lasso wound itself back. *"Giddy-up, partner! We gotta get this wagon train a-movin'!"* It was one of his features as a toy.

The voice brought Buzz back to his senses.

"Woody... Wait, how did I get here?"

"Oh, I don't know! Maybe somebody switched you into 'dark and stormy' mode."

"But I don't have a—" Buzz was about to rise to Woody's little jab—then stopped and coughed instead. Woody offered a hand, and Buzz took it. "Thank you, Woody."

“Good to have you back, Buzz.”

The two friends shared a smile.

Meanwhile...

“Hey, hurry up!”

“We can’t hold him much longer!”

“Don’t give up, guys!”

Donald, Goofy, and Sora were struggling to hold back young Xehanort, and they were already getting tired. It wasn’t long before the silver-haired boy managed to fling them back away from him.

“So, even empty puppets can be given strong hearts. I am going to have to remember that.” Young Xehanort turned to face Woody and Buzz.

The two toys were unfazed by his condescending tone. “Remember this—our hearts will always be connected to Andy’s. No matter what you do!”

“And that’s something you’ll never understand, because you’re hollower than a toy.”

Young Xehanort laughed. “But now I know a heart can be placed in the vessel of our choosing. For that, let me give you a parting gift to play with.” With that, he melted away into the darkness.

“Wait!”

Sora chased him down and lashed out with his Keyblade, but young Xehanort was already no more than a vision. The momentum of Sora’s blow carried him right through his translucent foe.

Just before he vanished entirely, Xehanort whispered something into Sora’s ear:

Find the hearts joined to yours.

“Huh?” Sora said instinctively. The darkness was rising up into the ceiling, revealing a miniature version of the town where Woody and the toys lived, except that there was a disc-shaped Heartless—King of Toys—smack-dab in the middle of it. *We’re still in another dimension!* Everyone got ready for a fight.

“Here it comes!”

Fierce winds caught the buildings and carried them upward into a great clear sky. Sora and his friends tried to fight it from the ground, but the great Heartless flew through the air beyond the reach of their attacks, and to make matters worse, the winds it created as it whirled around the battlefield made everything rise off the ground.

“Sora! This way!” Woody called, and Sora jumped up onto some airborne blocks after him.

“We’ll cover you from below!” Buzz shouted as he fired a succession of laser blasts to hamper the King of Toys, while Donald and Goofy held on to him so he didn’t blow away. Sora jumped higher and higher up the toy blocks until he finally arrived on the disc-shaped body of his opponent.

You won’t get away now.

Sora hammered the core of the Heartless with his Keyblade. With a thunderous crash, King of Toys fell still, then vanished in a burst of light.

Once the battle was over, they found themselves back in the hall of Galaxy Toys.

“Xehanort got away again.”

“Yeah, he’s a big chicken.”

Goofy and Donald were upset, but Sora appeared more dejected than anything.

“I’m sorry! I wanted to get you back to the real world,” he said apologetically to Woody and the other toys, hanging his head. Donald and Goofy watched him in surprise.

“It does seem that we’re trapped here,” said Buzz.

“We’ll never get home,” added Rex.

“Yeah, stuck like pigs,” Hamm quipped.

“Our position appears fixed,” said the sarge.

“Oh nooo,” the aliens cried.

Still, there was a certain cheerfulness in their voices.

Buzz walked up to the downcast boy. "A shame we'll have to stay a little longer...with our new best friends."

"Huh?"

Sora looked up and realized they were all smiling.

"After all the adventures we've had, we're not quite ready to say so long." Woody rested an elbow on Sora's shoulder and tipped up the brim of his cowboy hat.

"I'm sorry that I was being so stubborn. Please forgive me." Buzz held out his hand to Sora.

"Hey, you were just looking out for your friends," Sora said, shaking his head and grasping Buzz's hand. "No biggie."

"Yeah, somebody's gotta be the sensible one, especially since Woody's always gettin' in trouble," Hamm agreed, helping out his friend with a bit of humor.

"Gawrsh, that sounds a little like Sora, don't it?"

Sora and Woody glanced at each other as Donald immediately declared, "Yeah, and I'm the dependable one!"

"Like Buzz! ...Kinda," Rex said uncertainly, which made everyone smile even more.

"Besides, if we go back to the real world, we'll never see you again, right?" Woody asked.

"But...what about Andy?" Sora asked, starting to worry again. "You care about him so much."

It was Andy's love that had given all the toys hearts, so of course they wanted to get back to the real world, where he was, as soon as they could.

"And he's still right here with us," Buzz said with conviction.

"If we follow our hearts, we'll find him again," Woody added.

Sora could agree with that.

Oh— It doesn't matter who you are or where, as long as you're connected.

"So, Sora, are you goin' after that guy in the black coat?"

Organization XIII had caused so much trouble for Woody and the toys; their plans had to be stopped before they did something awful to more worlds and more people like his friends.

"Something tells me we can't join you on that mission," said Buzz in an understanding tone. Woody stopped and turned back, pointing at Sora's chest. "That's okay...because you've become part of our hearts."

Buzz, Rex, Hamm, the army men, and the aliens all stopped and turned around, too, reluctant to say good-bye to Sora, Goofy, and Donald. Woody said what they were all thinking: "So let us become a part of yours."

"Thank you!" Sora replied, beaming.

"Now, off you go. To infinity and beyond!" Buzz declared, lifting his face to the sky. Right now, the open hall of the toy store felt like infinite space, holding them all together.

Back in the Ocean Between, onboard the Gummi Ship, Sora was thinking something over.

"Sora, what about the power of waking?" Donald asked.

"You *had* to remind me," he answered with a groan.

"Well, gawrsh, we just wanna help keep ya motivated," Goofy pointed out. Of course they were worried.

Sora sighed and told them what had been on his mind: "I was thinking about Roxas. He's trapped here in my heart. But...he needs a body to be himself again."

We learned that toys can have a heart, but what can we do for someone who's just a heart?

"Aw, don't worry. Ienzo's workin' on a way to get him free. I'll betcha he's got the perfect body all lined up," said Goofy as Jiminy jumped out of Sora's hood.

"You've got the Gummiphone, Sora. Why don't ya try givin' him a call?"

Sora followed Jiminy's suggestion and pulled the Gummiphone out of his pocket. "Uhh, I guess so? Yeah, why not?"

After Jiminy showed him what buttons to press, someone appeared on the screen. But it wasn't Ienzo.

"Oh! Hiya, Sora!"

It was the king, Mickey. As soon as they heard his voice, Donald and Goofy pushed their way into view.

"Your Majesty!"

"Hey! Wha...? Wrong number?" Sora asked, confused.

The camera moved to include Riku crouching beside him. "No, Riku and I are visiting Radiant Garden. Actually, we were just about to call you guys, but it looks like you beat us to the punch."

"Sora, is something wrong?" Riku asked in concern.

Sora felt a little better seeing his friend's face again, and he decided to run the question by him. "I wanted to pick your brain. In order for us to recomplete Roxas, he needs a body, right?"

"Yeah, to put his heart in..." Riku paused in thought for a bit, then said, "Replicas..."

"Huh?" Sora had never heard the word before. Or had he? He wasn't sure.

"Well, Replicas are basically human."

"Uh, what?" Sora asked again.

"Oh yeah... You wouldn't remember. The previous Organization XIII developed realistic vessels to place hearts in, called Replicas. They're so real, in fact, that you'd actually mistake them for people. And with hearts, the Replicas will *become* people." The look in Riku's eyes grew distant for a second, but Sora couldn't guess what he was thinking.

"Cool, but if we get our hands on a Replica, will Roxas look like himself when he's recompleted?"

"Yup. The Replica takes the form of the heart inside it."

“That’s perfect!” Riku’s answer filled Sora with joy. All they had to do now was recover Roxas’s heart, and everything would work out.

Mickey was willing to pitch in, too. “I’ll talk to Ienzo. He was in the Organization back then, so he might know more.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Sora had found hope. *Now, if I can just get back the power of waking!*

Just then, all this talk of containers reminded him of something. “Wait... Do you guys think *they’re* after Replicas, too?” he asked Donald and Goofy.

“No, they definitely said ‘a black box,’” Goofy replied straightaway.

Now it was Riku’s turn to ask. “Who’s that?”

“The Organization and Maleficent,” Sora replied, then immediately gasped as he remembered too late that they had decided to keep this information a secret.

His two friends hurriedly pushed him out of the way.

“I guess we forgot to mention it.”

“Aw, it’s okay. But there’s something you should know about one of their members.”

Mickey began to tell them of the newly made Organization XIII—the true Organization XIII.

Xehanort was gathering thirteen seekers of darkness to counter the seven guardians of light, but some of the lights were missing. Even if they did find Aqua and Ventus, they still had no leads on Terra—except that his body was in Xehanort’s clutches as one of his vessels.

“So, let the rest of us worry about Roxas and Naminé for now,” Mickey finished. “You journey on, and keep an eye out for Terra.”

Once he was done, Donald and Goofy pushed Sora out of the way again.

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Stop that!” Sora snapped, shoving back and accidentally ending the call with a little *blip*.

“A vessel, huh...”

“Welp, at least it sounds like we’ll be able to do somethin’ for Roxas,” Goofy said quietly, his arms crossed.

Sora still felt hopeful, though. “We gotta help out Terra, too!”

“And don’t forget the power of waking!” his friends reminded him.

“Enough already, I get it!” Sora groaned with resignation.

I was so sure that just caring about other people and holding on to my friendships would be enough to get the power of waking back...but will it really?

The place, known as the Keyblade Graveyard, was filled with countless Keyblades jutting up from the ground like headstones. Among them were thirteen stone pillars. Saïx stood on top of one of them, while a man in a black coat stood on another.

“Humanity is a precious gift. And yet you wish to return to the Organization?” Saïx asked the man to his side.

“Oh yes...of course,” replied the other man. His voice was higher than Saïx’s. “One eradication at Axel’s hands was enough to learn where *not* to place my trust.”

“He gave you a second lease on life,” Saïx quietly disagreed.

The man gestured dramatically as he spoke. “He ripped me away from the one thing I care about. I don’t require humanity. Give me my research. I must see it to fruition, no matter the cost.”

“The Replicas,” Saïx practically whispered. The other man nodded and burst out into uncontrolled laughter.

“Yes. Soon they will replace, not just replicate. Given a heart, they can become just as real as any human.”

“What excellent tidings. I would hate to think we invited you back into our ranks only for you to fail to deliver our final vessel...Vexen.”

The other man removed his hood, revealing that he was indeed Vexen—the man who had once been known as Even, the faithful student.

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